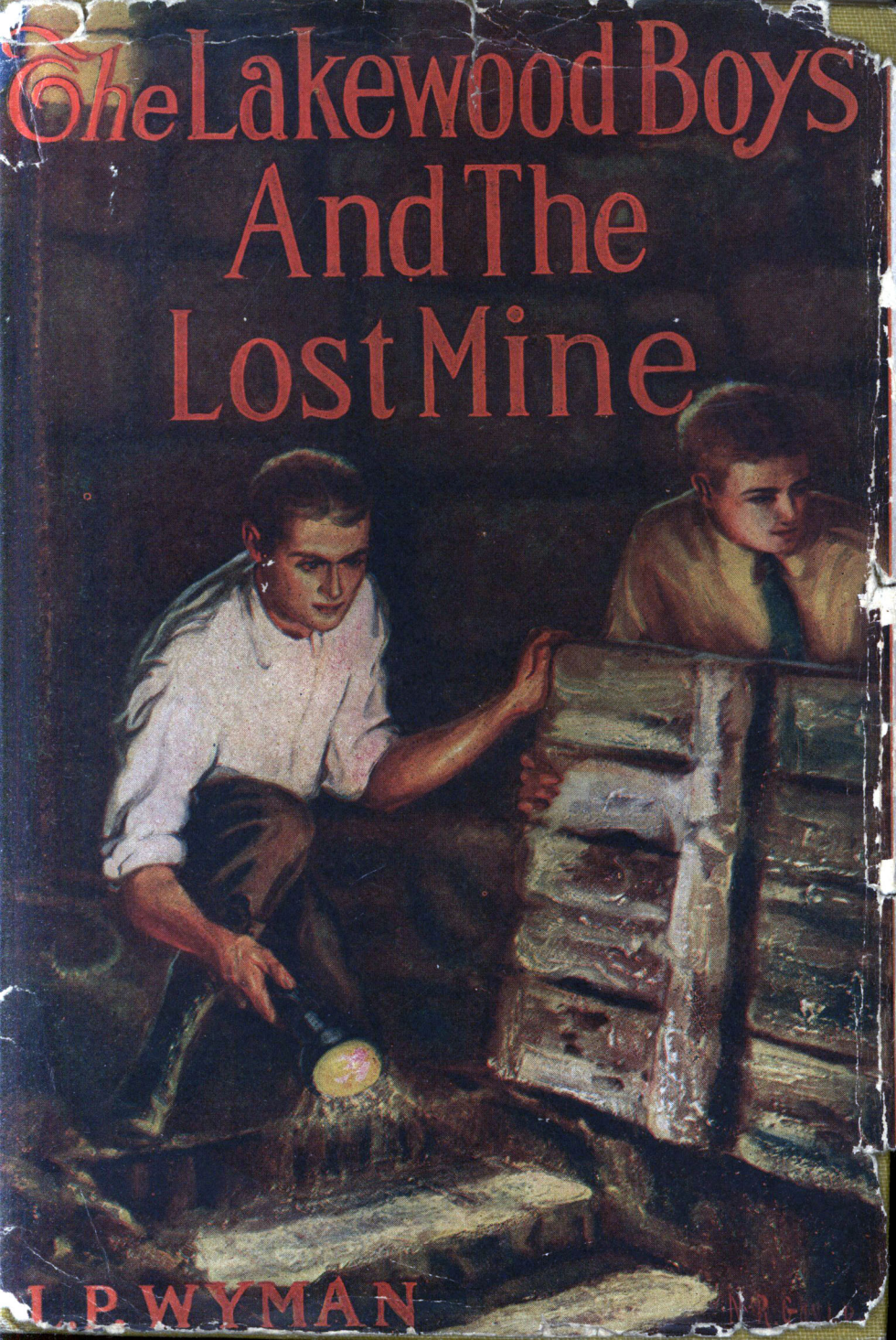
The Lakewood Boys And The Lost Mine



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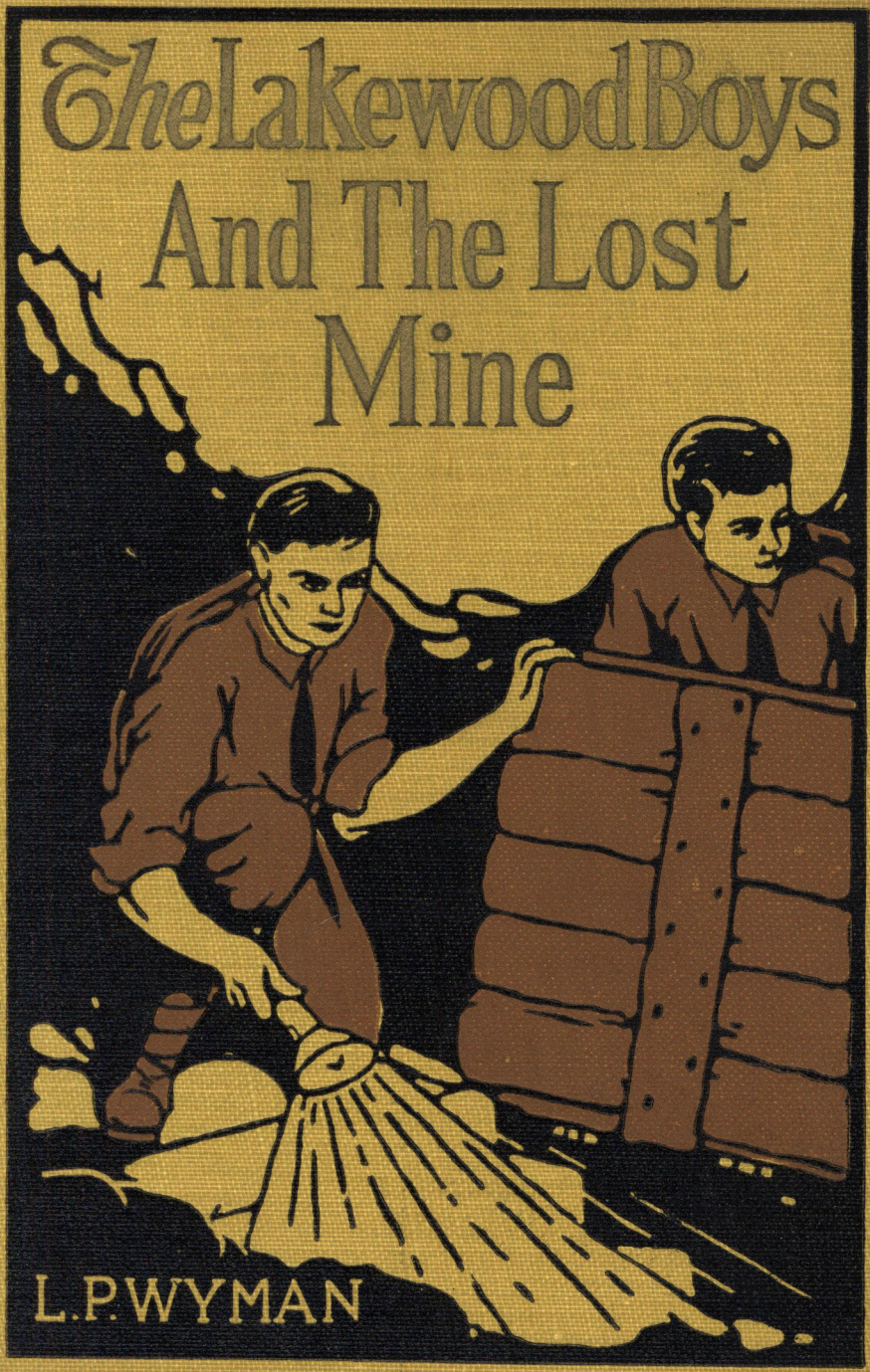
The Lakewood Boys And The Lost Mine



L. P. WYMAN

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The next moment they were throwing the rays of the light down the opening.

(Page 171) *(The Lakewood Boys and the Lost Mine)*

THE LAKEWOOD BOYS
AND THE LOST MINE

By L. P. WYMAN, PH.D.
Dean of the Pennsylvania Military College

AUTHOR OF

"The Lakewood Boys on the Lazy S," "The Lakewood Boys in the Frozen North," "The Lakewood Boys in the South Sea Islands," "The Lakewood Boys and the Polo Ponies," "The Golden Boys Series," etc.

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THE LAKEWOOD BOYS AND THE LOST MINE

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THE LAKEWOOD BOYS AND THE LOST MINE

CHAPTER I.

THE LONE INDIAN.

"WHOA, Satan."

As he spoke Bob Lakewood pulled hard on the reins and, after a moment's tugging, brought the magnificent animal to a stop. For several seconds the boy sat his horse and strained his ears.

"What's the big idea, Bob?"

As he asked the question, his brother, Jack, who was a year younger, rode up behind him and reined in his horse, an animal nearly, but not quite so imposing looking as Satan.

"I thought I heard something."

"Such as what?"

"Well, it's hard to tell just what it did sound like as it was so faint that I wasn't sure I heard anything at all, but it sounded like a groan."

"Spooks?"

"Maybe, but—There, didn't you hear it?"

"I sure did and it sounded enough like a spook to be the real thing."

"Which way did it come from?"

"I'd say from over that way," Jack replied, pointing to the right of the trail.

"Righto. Tie your horse and we'll investigate."

As he spoke the two boys slid from their saddles and, after making the horses fast to convenient trees, they plunged into the thick woods which bordered the trail. They had gone but a short distance, forcing their way through the dense underbrush, which literally filled the spaces between the trees, when they again heard the sound and this time it was decidedly nearer.

"We're going in the right direction," Bob declared.

"And whatever it is that's making that noise isn't a great ways off," Jack added.

"But it's a bit more to the left, I think."

"Left is right," Jack assented as he changed their course slightly in the suggested direction.

Another hundred feet and the sound, now distinctly a groan, came once more and this time close at hand.

"Over by that fallen tree," Bob pointed.

A moment later and they were bending over an old Indian who was pinned to the ground by the tree

which had fallen across his chest. The branches had prevented the trunk from crushing in his chest, but it had fallen low enough to exert a great deal of pressure and to prevent him from moving.

"Are you badly hurt?" Bob asked anxiously as he bent close to the man's face.

But only a hollow groan came from his lips as he lay with closed eyes.

"He's unconscious," Jack whispered as he too leaned close.

"I guess so," Bob agreed. "And there's no knowing how long he's been here, but probably this tree came down in the storm night before last."

"And he's been here ever since?"

"Looks that way. But come, we must get him out."

"Reckon I'll have to find something to use as a pry, we never could lift that tree without it."

"Well, make it snappy, seconds may count with him."

Jack was gone so long that Bob was beginning to fear that he had been unable to find what he was after but, just as he was on the point of going to look for him, he heard him coming and, as soon as he was in sight, he saw that he was dragging a heavy stick of timber.

"This is the best I could do," he panted.

"It looks kind of rotten," Bob shook his head. "Think it'll hold?"

"Don't know, but it was all I could find."

"Well, we'll have to try it. But go easy," he cautioned as Jack pushed the end of the stick beneath the trunk of the tree a few feet from where the Indian lay. "If it breaks it may let the tree down harder than ever and crush the life out of him. Easy now."

Jack got his shoulder under the end of the lever and carefully straightened. The stick creaked ominously but, inch by inch, the tree rose until Bob, reaching under the man's shoulders, was able to drag him out.

"All right now," he shouted, but even as he spoke, Jack's lever snapped and the big tree crashed down to the earth.

"Gracious, what an escape," Bob gasped as he noted that a branch, which had held the trunk from crushing the Indian, had snapped off short and allowed the tree to lie almost flat on the ground. "If that stick had broken a second sooner it would have been all up with him, I'm afraid."

"All down you mean," Jack grinned. "But, 'all's well that ends well,' you know. What are we going to do with him now?"

"We ought to have some water, but there's none nearer than the spring, so far's I know and that's

over a mile down the trail. I reckon the best thing to do is to carry him out and get on one of the horses and down to the spring. I don't think he's so badly hurt, but it's impossible to say for sure. He's pretty old."

Fortunately the old Indian was not heavy, not over a hundred and twenty pounds, but, even so, it was hard work carrying him through the dense forest and, short as the distance was, it took them fully half an hour to reach the trail, and they were both panting heavily when, at last, they placed their burden on the ground and untied the horses. The old man had not once opened his eyes, but he still breathed and continued to utter the sounds which had brought them to him.

"We'll lay him across Satan's saddle and I'll hold him on while you lead the two horses," Bob suggested.

Close beside the trail about a mile from where they were was a large spring with clear cold water bubbling up from a fissure between the rocks, and by its side, a few minutes later, they laid the old Indian. Then, wetting his handkerchief with the water, Bob began to bathe his forehead while Jack rubbed his wrists. Under their skilled ministrations the old Indian soon began to show signs of returning consciousness and soon opened his eyes.

"Injun dead?" he grunted softly.

"Not quite," Bob told him. "Keep still now and you'll be stronger in a minute."

He obediently closed his eyes again and the boys continued their first aid treatment.

"Where Injun?" he asked in a voice much stronger, a few minutes later.

"You're safe," Bob assured him.

"Injun heap better," he said struggling to sit up. But Bob gently forced him back and urged him to wait a bit.

"Your strength's coming back fast, but you're still pretty weak," he cautioned him.

"Heap weak," he sighed as he settled back.

"Drink this," Bob said holding a cup of water to his lips as he raised his head.

The Indian swallowed a little of the water gratefully and it seemed to go far toward reviving him, and soon Bob allowed him to sit up.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Heap sore here," and the old man placed his hand on his chest.

"It was only a branch that saved you from being crushed," Bob told him. "Do you think you can stand?"

The old man made a brave attempt to get on his feet, but the effort was too great and he sank back with a low moan of pain.

"Injun heap papoose," he grunted.

"I'm afraid you're hurt more'n we thought. Do you think there are any ribs broken?"

"Mebby one busted here. Heap pain touch him," he said placing his hand on his chest just below his heart.

Bob gave his brother a signal which he understood and, a few minutes later, they were talking in low tones a short distance from where the Indian was lying.

"I'm afraid he's hurt worse than we thought," Bob said, laying his hand on his brother's shoulder. "I believe one or more of his ribs is broken and I don't like the way he breathes."

"You think he's not going to live?"

"I'm not doctor enough to tell that, but I do think he ought to have a doctor."

"Same here. Do you think he can ride to the ranch?"

"Not on horseback."

"Then suppose I get the buck-board?"

"That's what I was going to propose."

"All right, I'm off."

"You better take Satan, he's faster than your horse."

It was nearly ten miles to the Lazy S, the ranch where they were staying, and Bob knew that it would be at best two hours before he could expect Jack back, and he shook his head sadly as he again

bent over the old Indian. He lay with closed eyes but Bob was uncertain whether or not he was asleep. He breathed heavily and it was the peculiar rasping sound, which came with every breath, that worried the boy.

For an hour he did not move, then he opened his eyes and feebly asked for water.

"White boy heap good to Injun," he whispered as he again closed his eyes.

"What's your name?" Bob asked.

"Karantanoron," Bob could barely catch the word.

"You live near here?"

"Heap long way. Cabin burn—Injun no got home—try get Mexico City—got brother there."

Bob could see that it was sapping the old man's strength to talk so he told him he had better not try to say any more just then. Slowly the time passed. Far up in the blue sky a big bird wheeled slowly in great circles and the boy knew that a buzzard was waiting for his prey.

"But this is the time you get left," he muttered.

Not long after he heard the sound of wheels bumping over the rocks on the trail below and, a few minutes later, the buck-board, drawn by a pair of small, but powerful bronchos, came in sight. On the seat with Jack was a young girl, Sue Stebbins,

the daughter of Jeb Stebbins, who managed the Lazy S.

"How's the patient?" Jack asked as he leaped from the seat.

"About the same. Hello, Sue."

"Hello, Bob. You think he's badly hurt?" the girl asked anxiously as she bent over the Indian.

"I don't like the way he breathes," Bob told her.

"Nor I. I telephoned Doc before we left and he said he'd be at the ranch by the time we got back and I reckon we'd better get going as soon as possible."

The buck-board was a long affair and they had arranged a mattress behind the seat and on it they carefully placed the old man, who opened his eyes as they lifted him, but said nothing. Sue drove while Bob sat beside the patient protecting him as much as possible from the inevitable jolting. Jack led the way on his horse.

It was two hours and a half before they reached the ranch as they had to hold the bronchos in to a walk the greater part of the way to avoid too much jolting, a small fussy appearing man, was on the porch talking with Jeb Stebbins as they drove up.

"Thought you'd never get here," he greeted them.

"We had to take our time it's so rough," Sue explained.

Bob and Jack lifted the old Indian from the mat-

tress and carried him into the house and placed him on a bed. He lay with closed eyes and it was plain that he had lapsed into unconsciousness. Hastily the doctor set about his examination.

"I'm afraid it's all up with him," he announced a little later. "He ain't damaged so much far's that goes, but his lungs are mighty weak and that busted rib hasn't helped much. If you'd found him as soon's that tree fell on him he might have pulled through, but he must have been there some time."

"You mean he's going to die?" Bob asked.

"That's about the size of it."

"How long?"

"May be two days, may be less. You see he's got pneumonia, double pneumonia, right now and it's usually pretty quick with these Indians."

Everything possible was done for the old Indian but, as the doctor had said, they had found him too late. He was very old and his vitality low, leaving him practically helpless to fight the disease. He died the next day. But before he went came a period of consciousness during which he made it known that he wished to see Bob and Jack alone.

"Injun—go Happy Hunting Ground," he whispered as soon as they were by his bedside. "White boys—heap good—to Injun. Injun give um—this. Heap lot—gold—there. Injun see um."

As he spoke he drew from beneath his old shirt

what looked like a piece of old parchment and handed it to Bob. Then he closed his eyes and when Bob spoke to him he gave no sign that he heard him. He died an hour later without again being conscious.

Bob put the piece of paper away and it was not until after they had buried the old Indian that he referred to it.

"Wonder what that paper was," he said to Jack as they were sitting on the porch.

"Maybe we'd know better if we took a look at it," Jack responded dryly.

Bob went to his room and was back in a moment with that paper.

"It's a map," he exclaimed as he spread it out on his knee.

"I thought likely. But what do you suppose it's a map off?"

"From the way he spoke I judge it's the location of a gold mine. You remember he said, 'heap lot gold there'."

"And it's probably right where that X is."

"No doubt about that, but where in the world is that X supposed to be? All the writing on it is in some language that I never knew existed. In fact they seem to me to be just marks rather than words, all except this one here; that looks as though it might be a word."

"But how'll we ever find out in what part of the world it's supposed to be?"

"Search me. Hold on a minute though. I'll tell you what we'll do: we'll make a copy of all the marks and send it to Professor Blake. He can tell what it means if anyone in the world can."

"You said something. What he doesn't know about those old languages doesn't amount to a hill of rotten beans."

They at once went to their room and Jack, who was very clever at copying, made an exact copy of every mark on the paper, omitting only the lines and those marks which were plainly meant to represent mountains, trees and the like.

"How long'll it be before we get an answer do you suppose?" Jack asked as he completed the copy.

"Ten or twelve days anyhow and probably longer if he can't read it right off," Bob replied.

"Can you imagine it taking him any length of time to read anything?" Jack laughed.

"Hardly, but I reckon some of those hieroglyphics'll make even him scratch his head a bit."

A letter, explaining the circumstances, together with the copy of the marks, was sent that very day to Professor Blake of The Fortress, a military college in the East which the boys attended, and, in the activities of ranch life, the matter was nearly forgotten by the boys.

Bob and Jack Lakewood had come, from their home in Maine, to The Lazy S some weeks before and had already had many exciting adventures including a run in with a band of cattle rustlers which resulted in the capture of the entire band. The Lazy S was a large ranch in the western part of Texas, owned by a Mr. Leeds, of New York, a friend of theirs whom they had met in Maine, but run by Jeb Stebbins, assisted by his daughter, Sue. Jeb Stebbins was an experienced cattle man and under his management The Lazy S was one of the most prosperous ranches in the West.

Two weeks went by and then came a letter, addressed to Bob and Jack Lakewood, bearing the well know mark of the military college.

"Here's the answer to our letter," Bob said as he came into the living room where Jack was reading.

"Good. Hurry up and see what it says."

Bob hurriedly opened the letter and read as follows:

"My Dear Boys:

"Your letter came duly to hand and it has been a treat to solve the puzzle of the marks. It would be rather difficult to give you a literal translation of them and I judge it will be more satisfactory to you if I simply explain what they mean. In the first

place, the mine is situated in Mexico, somewhere not far from Aguas Calientes, which is in about the central part of the country.

"The map which you have is very old, that is unless it is a copy, which is more than likely, as it refers back to the time of the Tolpecs, a race which lived there between the seventh and the twelfth century. In fact, the last two characters, freely translated, means, 'the lost mine of the Tolpecs.'

"This is about all I can make of it, but I hope it will give you the information you desire.

"Hoping to see you next term and wishing you all sorts of good things, I am,

"Very truly yours,

"IRA BLAKE."

CHAPTER II.

OFF FOR MEXICO.

"THE lost mine of the Tolpecs! During the seventh to the twelfth century! Why that's several hundred years before Columbus discovered America!" Jack gasped when Bob had finished reading the letter.

"Quite some time back for a fact," Bob agreed.

"But who do you suppose lost the thing?"

"Lost what thing?"

"Why, the mine, of course."

"Oh, the mine."

"You haven't heard of anything else being lost, have you?"

"Well, the professor says it's the lost mine of the Tolpecs so I suppose they lost it."

"Mighty careless of them, I'd say."

"You talk as though them might have dropped it out of their pocket."

There was a pause of several minutes and then Bob asked:

"Well?"

"Well?" Jack replied with a grin.

"Well what?"

"Of course."

"Of course what?"

"Of course we're going to find that mine."

"You mean it?"

"Sure. Why not? It's a shame to have a thing like that lying around loose all these years. It must be lonesome."

"But maybe it was found long ago," Bob suggested.

"Don't you believe it. I reckon that Indian would have known if they had. Remember he said he'd been there."

"How do you suppose he found it?"

"Search me. Maybe he stubbed his toe on it."

"Now you're trying to be funny. Seriously it seems a strange thing that he alone should have found it and known of it. How do you suppose he came by that map? I don't believe he knew enough to have drawn it."

"Of course he didn't. That paper is old. Just see how yellow it is."

"Well, there's no use speculating about it. It'll be a good trip whether we find it or not. When do we start."

"The sooner the quicker, I say."

"The sooner the quicker what?"

As the boys looked up they saw Jeb Stebbins

standing in the doorway. They had not as yet said anything to him or to anyone else about the map thinking it better to wait until they had received the letter from Professor Blake. But now, at a nod from Jack, Bob showed him the map and also the letter.

"Well, I'll be jiggered," Jeb said as soon as he had glanced at the map and read the letter. "So the old man gave you this?"

"Yes, sir. What do you think of it?" Bob replied.

"Were you two boys thinking of trying to find it?" Jeb asked without replying to the question.

"Why, yes, we thought of it," Bob replied.

"But it's too risky. Mighty wild country down there and some of the natives aren't any to friendly."

"About how far is it from here?" Jack asked.

"A matter of a thousand or twelve hundred miles."

"Gee, I thought that far'd take you clean to South America."

"Not quite," Jeb laughed. "Mexico is a mighty big country."

"I'll say she is when you can go a thousand miles and then only be half way to the end of it," Jack declared.

"Now, boys," Jeb began, "if you're determined to go down there there's two things you've got to do."

"What are they," Bob asked as he paused.

"You've got to get your Dad's consent. You can send him a night letter tonight and you'll probably get an answer tomorrow some time."

"All right, we'll do that. Now what's the second thing?"

"You've got to take Slats with you. You see, he been through that country, in fact he spent two or three years in Mexico and can talk their lingo and knows their ways."

"But can you spare him?" Bob asked.

"Sure I can or I wouldn't have mentioned it. Things are rather slow here just at this time of year and I'll have plenty of help."

"Then of course we'll be tickled to death to have him go, that is, provided he wants to."

"He'll want to all right," Jeb assured them. "Slats is always in for anything with the spice of adventure to it. But there he is out on the porch. Call him in and see what he says."

Slats Magee, a man well over six feet and thin almost to the point of emaciation, hence his name, entered the room, with a look of inquiry on his face, a moment later.

"What's up, Boss?" he asked.

"How'd you like to take a vacation down in Mexico?" Jeb asked him.

"Mexico, d'yer say?" Slats asked quickly.

"Yes, with these boys."

"Fine and dandy. But how come?"

Jeb showed him the map and the letter which they had received concerning it. The man studied it for several minutes before he spoke.

"I've heard 'bout that ere mine. It's a kind of tradition down that way an' most every year an expedition's fitted out to try ter find it, but it's still lost 'sfar's I know. Never took much stock in it myself."

"You ever been there?" Bob asked.

"Not right whar this map says it is, but I've been prutty near it," he told them.

"Then you don't believe there is any such mine?" Jeb asked.

"Wall, now, I wouldn't want ter say jest that, you know. I said as how I never did take much stock in the stories I've heard tell 'bout it, but this here map kinder makes it look like there might be sumpin' in it after all."

"Then you'll go?" Jack asked eagerly.

"Shore, I'll go."

"That's fine," Bob declared. "Now we'll write that telegram to father and phone it to Cold Springs."

But it was two days before they received a reply and they were in a fever of anxiety, wondering why it did not come. But they were wild with joy when

finally the station agent at Cold Springs called them up and read the message to them.

"If Jeb thinks it is safe go ahead. Be careful. Good luck."

"Kinder puts it up to me, eh?" Jeb grinned when they repeated the message to him.

"And, of course, you'll say yes," Jack declared eagerly.

"Well, now, if I didn't have all the confidence in the world in Slats I tell you right now that I wouldn't take the responsibility," he assured them.

"But as it is we can go?" Jack asked.

"I guess so," Jeb consented, albeit a bit reluctantly.

"And we'll bring you back enough gold to build a house with," Jack laughed.

"You bring yourselves back safe and sound and I'll be satisfied," Jeb told them.

A week later found the three leaving the train at the little Mexican town Fresnillo. It was late in the afternoon and, after securing lodgings in the one small hotel which the town boasted, Slats left them with the promise that he would be back in time for supper.

"We want to get an early start in the morning," he told them, "and I've got to buy four burros besides all our camping outfit. No, you'd be more bother than help," he added, when Bob suggested that they accompany him.

Before they started Jeb had advised that they hire three or four natives to go with them, but this suggestion Slats had vetoed.

"Yer can't trust 'em," he told them. "I've got a compass and thar's no danger of gettin' lost an' besides, if we find anything in the shape of a gold mine, thar ain't one of them fellers but wouldn't steal it if they had ter kill the whole three of us ter do it. No siree, I don't want none of them in our party."

After taking their luggage to their room the two boys returned to the street to see the sights, as Jack put it. There was no danger that they would lose their way for the town boasted but a single street, lined on both sides with one story buildings. Some of these were of brick, but the greater part were made of a kind of mud or clay and looked to them as though they might tumble down any minute. Dirty, scantily dressed childred played in the street and the men, for the most part, were, as Bob whispered, "a hard looking lot."

"I don't wonder that Slats didn't want to take any of them with us," he whispered to Jack. "I wouldn't trust one of them with a German mark."

A short walk convinced them that they had seen all that was worth seeing in the town and Jack declared that it was a little bit less than nothing at all.

"I'd rather live in vain than live here," he de-

clared as soon as they were back in their room.

"It'd be about the same thing. I reckon," Bob assured him as he pulled the covers from the bed.

"What's the idea?" Jack asked.

"Little exploring expedition," Bob grinned. "I'm going to see if this bed's already occupied."

" 'Where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise'," Jack quoted, but Bob went ahead with his search.

To his surprise as well as delight he found the bed surprisingly clean and, as far as he could see, entirely free of tenants.

"I'll sleep better tonight," he told Jack as he remade the bed.

"Guess bed bugs don't thrive down here," Jack laughed. "I can heardly imagine there being none in that bed if they are in the country."

"Maybe that's their own virtue."

"Well, it's a good one," Jack assured him.

Slats returned just as the bell rang for supper.

"Got everything fixed," he told them. "We'll get off by six in the morning. These beggars don't get up very early and it's best not ter have a lot of 'em seein' which way we go."

As they planned to be up by four o'clock they went to bed soon after supper. Slats's room opened out of their's and they left the door open between them. Some time in the night a slight noise in the room awakened Bob. It was so dark that he could see

nothing and he was not sure that the sound came from the inside, so he lay without moving and listened. For several minutes there was no sound save Jack's breathing and an occasional snore from the other room, and he had about decided that the noise came from the outside, when it was repeated and he was convinced that there was someone beside themselves in the room. His first impulse was to turn on the lights, but he remembered that there were no electric lights in the town and that they had used an oil lamp. He also remembered that it was on the table on the opposite side of the room.

What should he do? He was sure that some thief was after their valuables, but he also knew that many of the natives were desperate men who thought little or nothing of killing a man and this fellow undoubtedly was armed, at least with a knife. In the darkness he would have all the advantage. If he kept still the man would probably leave in time without harming them but, he thought, their money would leave with him and that, he knew, would, at the very least, postpone their expedition.

He knew that he was taking a big risk, but he decided that conditions justified it. Silently he rose to a sitting position and swung his feet to the floor. If only the bed did not creak. He could hear the man breathe and now and then a slight movement as he stepped gave him a good idea as to his exact posi-

tion. He took a step, carefully testing the floor lest the squeak of a board betray him. But the floor was well laid and there was no sound as he advanced. After what seemed a long time he knew that only a few feet separated him from the marauder and, suddenly, giving a loud shout, he sprang.

Bob's sense of direction was excellent and he landed fair and square on the man and bore him to the floor, probably the most surprised Mexican in Mexico. But the intruder was not one to submit tamely and they rolled over and over now one on top and then the other. It was a powerful man, Bob had surprised and, almost before he knew it he had a firm hold on Bob's neck and was quickly choking the life out of him. But fortunately for Bob help was close at hand. His shout had awakened Jack and Slats, and the latter, guessing the situation, struck a light just as the man's hand closed on Bob's neck. Jack, also was out of bed by this time and both he and Slats sprang to Bob's aid.

The robber, seeing that they were too many for him to hope to overcome sprang to his feet and was out of the window before any of them could stop him. Bob scrambled to his feet and began feeling of his throat.

"That guy certainly had a strong grip," he told them.

"How'd it happen?" Slats asked.

Bob started to tell them when a loud knock sounded on the door.

"Who's thar?" Slats called out.

"What matter? I hear someone shout," was the reply.

"It's the guy that's boss here. Open the door," Slats whispered.

Bob turned the key and the landlord entered the room, followed by another man who, they supposed, was the night clerk.

"There was a fellow in here trying to get away with our money," Bob explained.

"An' he'd done it if it hadn't been for you," Slats added.

The proprietor expressed his indignation in no uncertain words but, as they were unable to give an adequate description of the man, he told them that it would be little short of impossible to do anything about it.

"Wall, let's see if he got anything," Slats suggested.

A hurried search of their bags and pockets disclosed that he had secured only a few dollars which Bob had in his inside coat pocket, and a wallet of Jack's, which however, contained only a little change. The bags had not been opened.

"Well, he didn't get much of anything so I guess

we might as well let it drop," Bob said, and the others agreed.

"But you can sleep now safely," the proprietor assured them, "I will have a man on watch outside the rest of the night."

As it was only a little after one o'clock they decided that they must get some more sleep, but they took the precaution to see that the windows were securely fastened. Fortunately the night was cool so they were not bothered with the heat.

CHAPTER III.

ROBBED.

It seemed to both Bob and Jack that they had hardly closed their eyes for the second time when Slats shook them and announced that it was time to get up. Day was just breaking but, so anxious were they to be on their way, that they did not have to be called a second time.

Slats had arranged for an early breakfast and it was ready by the time they were dressed. While they were eating the proprietor himself waited on them and again expressed his sorrow that they had been disturbed in the night. But they assured him that they did not consider him at all to blame and he seemed much relieved.

When they came out on the veranda they found a small boy holding by their bridles four burros or small donkeys. Three of them had saddles on while the fourth was laden with an enormous pack so large that it seemed to the boys that the poor beast would be crushed.

"Ain't they cute?" Jack laughed.

"Cute is right," Bob agreed. "But what's the

idea of the little cuties?" he asked turning to Slats who had just come out after settling with the hotel keeper.

"You mean why didn't I get horses?

"Yep, why not horses?"

"Wall, yer'll have an answer ter that question 'fore ye're many days older. These fellers ain't prutty nor they ain't what yer'd call speedy but, believe me, they'll go whar no horse could keep his feet and that's what we want."

"But you'll have to hold up your feet to keep them from dragging on the ground," Bob laughed.

"May be," Slats grinned as he swung his leg over the back of the largest animal.

But his feet cleared the ground by about two inches and Jack declared that the burro was standing on tip toe.

"One good thing about them," Bob laughed as he got on the next in size.

"What's that?" Jack asked, mounting the third one.

"Why, if they get tired we can carry them for awhile."

As they rode off through the town they did not see a single soul, a fact at which Slats seemed much pleased.

"Most of these fellers down here are too lazy to work 'cept when they have ter ter keep from

starvin'," he told them. "An' if some of 'em was ter see us ridin' off like this, he'd more'n likely follow us and make trouble."

"You mean he'd steal our provisions?" Bob asked.

"He'd steal anything he'd git his hands on."

"Well, I reckon no one saw us," Jack declared.

"Except the hotel man and that boy," Bob added.

"The hotel man's all right," Slats assured them. "He's honest or that is, he's as honest as it's possible fer a Greaser ter be, an' that ain't sayin' a whole lot."

"How about the boy?" Bob asked.

"Dunno nothin' 'bout him," Slats shook his head. "I intended ter go git the burros myself an' I've kinder been wonderin' why the man I bought 'em of sent that boy up with 'em. 'Tain't their way ter be so 'commodatin' but mebby it's all right."

By this time they were well out of the town. Bob was in the lead while Slats brought up the rear leading the animal which carried their camping equipment and provisions. They were heading due north and Bob soon asked:

"Aren't we going in the wrong direction?"

"Sure we are," Slats replied.

"And what's the idea?"

"We'll turn and circle a bit soon. Yer see, if any of them Greasers has a notion ter follow us I want ter throw 'em off the trail if I can."

About two miles from the town they struck into the woods where the road was little more than a trail and, after following this for a little more than a mile they came to the bed of a stream which was entirely dry.

"Reckon we'll follow this here fer a while," Slats proposed. "I'm a thinkin' it bears off ter the southwest an' that's the way we want to hit, an' it won't be easy ter follow our trail over them rocks. Now let 'em take it easy like an' they'll pick their way all right."

The bed of the stream was nothing but rocks many of them of large size and the boys were filled with wonder to see the way in which the little animals picked their way. As Slats had guessed the course of the stream's bed bore to the southwest and they followed it until Slats called a halt and declared that it was time for dinner. They were now deep in the dense forest where there was no sound save the rustle of the trees and the noise made by some wild animal as it scuttled out of sight at their approach, and other sounds peculiar to the forest.

"Listen," Slats ordered as he began to unpack the provisions.

"What is it?" Jack asked.

"Unless I miss my guess thar's a little brook right off that way," he said pointing toward the

west. "An' if thar is it's more'n likely thar's a trout or two in it. How'd they go fer dinner, eh?"

Jack never went far from home without his rod and line and Slats had only to suggest trout and he had them out and was starting off in the direction indicated.

"Look out yer don't get lost," Slats called after him.

"You bet," Jack shouted back.

He struck the brook, a little stream not more than three feet wide, before he had gone a hundred feet.

"Can't use a fly there," he thought as he saw the trees and thick underbrush would prevent him from making a cast. So, picking up a piece of a stick, he began scratching in the earth for angle worms. They were, as he muttered a few minutes later, scarcer than hen's teeth, but, after nearly fifteen minutes of work he managed to secure six small ones. He then followed the brook up stream for about a hundred feet until he came to a deep hole into which the water fell making considerable noise.

"That looks like a good place," he thought as he pushed his way through the underbrush and secured a position just above the pool.

The worm had nearly touched the water when there was a sudden swirl and the rod was nearly jerked from his hands. There was little space for the fish to run and he did not have to let out much

line, but he was in a very difficult position to land a fish and it took all his skill to keep a tight line and finally he was obliged to catch hold of it and pull the fish in hand over hand.

"Good two pounds," he said aloud when, at last he had it safe on the shore. "Wonder if there's another in there."

There were several more and, at the end of a half hour he had caught three more nearly, but not quite as large as the first.

He hurried back and found that they had a fire going and the frying pan all ready and, as he had dressed and washed the fish by the brook, they were soon sizzling in the bacon fat.

"This brook's runnin' too much ter the south," Slats announced as they were about to start off again, "so I reckon we'll have ter give her the good bye and blaze a trail fer ourselves more ter the west."

"You reckon we've thrown anyone, who might have tried to follow us, off the track?" Bob asked.

"Hard ter say, but reckon we've done our best."

Leaving the bed of the stream they struck off more to the west and now they were not long in realizing the wisdom of Slats in picking the small animals instead of horses. The way now led steadily up hill and so rough was it that a horse would never have been able to make any headway, but the burros seemed to accept it as a matter of course and, al-

though their progress was necessarily slow, they needed no urging.

"They'll keep this up all day and never grunt nar ask ter stop fer a rest," Slats assured them.

"They're certainly wonderful," Bob agreed.

"And they don't ride so bad either," Jack added.

All through the afternoon they climbed the gentle slope and when, about five o'clock, Slats ordered a halt on the bank of a stream of good size, he announced that they had made all of thirty miles.

"About an hour's ride in a car," Jack grinned.

"Yep, but it's a good day's work here," Slats told him.

They were provided with a light, but strong tent large enough for all of them to sleep in and it was soon pitched and they set about getting supper. Jack caught another mess of trout although they were much smaller than those he had taken from the little brook.

"But they'll be all the sweeter," Slats assured him.

Although it was the middle of August twilight was very brief and by half past seven they were ready for bed.

"Got your map handy, Jack?" Slats asked as they sat by the camp fire. "Mine's in my pack."

Jack felt in his pocket and the next minute he sprang to his feet and began a hurried search through his clothes. Before starting on the trip he

had made two copies of the map and had given the original to Bob and one of the copies to Slats, keeping the other himself.

"It's gone," he announced after he had felt in every pocket.

"You sure?" ob asked.

"Sure as guns. I had it in this pocket and—"

"Could it have fallen out?" Bob interrupted.

"It's got a flap and a button on it so it's impossible."

"Then that fellow got it last night."

"You think so?"

"Guess thar's not much doubt about it," Slats broke in.

"But how do you suppose he happened to get that map?" Bob asked.

"I dunno, but I reckon he got it," and Slats slowly shook his head.

"Well, what's to be done?" Jack asked.

"Nothin' 'cept to get thar as soon as we can and to keep our eyes open."

"You think he'll have sense enough to know what it is?" Bob asked.

"Can't tell that. Some of them Greasers are prutty sharp and some are mighty dumb. It's a toss up which kind he was."

"Well, it's pretty sure that when we had to send

it to the professor to get him to read it that he won't be able to," Jack declared.

"Reckon thar's sumpin' in that too, but it don't really get us anywhar. It's all guess work jest the same."

"Guess work it right," Bob said, "but I think with Jack that the chances are that he'll not know what it is and will probably throw it away or burn it up."

"Do you suppose it's possible that he was after that map?" Jack asked.

"I don't see how he could have known that we had it," Bob declared.

"Nor I," Slats added.

"Then I'm not going to worry my head any more about it," Jack declared.

" 'Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you'," Bob laughed as he got up and stretched himself.

The night passed without anything to disturb them and they were up before sunrise and by six o'clock had breakfast eaten and were packed up ready to start.

"Two hundred miles at thirty miles a day will be seven days with ten miles to spare," Bob said as they were about to mount.

"But we won't make thirty miles every day," Slats told him. "We'll be lucky if we make it in less'n nine days an' it may take us two weeks. I

reckon we'll strike some prutty rough sledin' between here an' thar."

"I'd like to know what you call the going we've been over so far," Jack declared.

"Only middlin' rough, only middlin'," Slats assured him.

The day gave promise of being well nigh perfect, but before they had been gone an hour heavy clouds began to gather in the west and just before eight o'clock it began to rain.

"I'm afraid we're in fer a spell o' weather," Slats said as he stopped and cast his eyes around.

"'What can't be cured must be endured'," Bob quoted cheerfully.

"An' I reckon we can't cure the weather none," Slats remarked philosophically.

As they advanced the rain fell faster and faster and, driven by the rapidly rising wind, was stinging their faces. At the first hint of the storm they put on their rubber ponchos, but even so it soon became very disagreeable traveling and, at the end of another hour, Slats proposed that they call a halt.

"We ain't makin' much headway an' I reckon it's mighty hard on the donkeys the footin's gettin' so slippery. Reckon we might's well call it a day while the callin's good."

"You think it's going to rain all day?" Jack asked.

"More'n likely. Wind's right fer it."

He was right for all the rest of the day and for the greater part of the night the rain fell steadily and they huddled in the little tent and slept as much as they could. Shortly after three o'clock in the morning Jack awoke with a feeling that something was wrong. The rain was still falling although not so hard as when he had gone to sleep, and the wind, which had blown hard all day, had entirely died down. He could hear the deep breathing of his brother and Slats and knew that they were sound asleep. He was not sure that he had really heard anything, but had that undefinable feeling that some sound had disturbed his sleep. So he listened straining his ears that they might catch the slightest sound.

Perhaps it was five minutes before he heard that which made him sure that he had not been mistaken. Someone or something was moving stealthily about behind the tent where their store of provisions was stacked beneath a rubber covering. His first impulse was to arouse the others but, on second thought, he decided not to as it was probably only some animal which he could easily scare off. He had a flashlight on the ground beside him and, with that in his left hand and his automatic in his right, he wriggled out of the tent. The darkness was absolute, and he had to feel his way inch by inch as he crept noiselessly around the corner of the tent. As

he paused every foot or two he could hear that which told him that something was at their stores, and he was pretty sure that it was not a four footed animal. He knew that the supplies were about ten feet from the back of the tent and, as soon as he reached the back corner, he flashed on the light at the same time ordering "hands up."

It was a man and, as he straightened up and threw his hands over his head, he gave a startled grunt.

"What you doing here?" Jack demanded.

Before the man had time to reply Bob called from the tent.

"What's the matter, Jack?"

"Come out here," Jack called keeping the man covered with both flashlights and revolver. "And make it snap—"

But at that instant something struck him on the head and everything went black. When he came to, Bob was holding his head in his lap and Slats was bathing his forehead with cold water.

"What's the idea?" he murmured in a weak voice.

"That's what we want to know," Bob replied. "But how do you feel?"

"A bit woozy, but I reckon I'm still on earth."

"You got a lump on the side of your head big enough to make anyone woozy," Bob told him.

"Kind of knocked me silly, eh?"

"I'll say it did."

"How long?"

"It's about ten minutes since we found you."

"But what hit me? I had the fellow covered and he didn't make a single move."

"There must have been two of 'em," Bob told him. "It was this rock that hit you," he added, picking up a stone about the size of his fist.

"Well, he scored a bulls eye all right," Jack grinned. "Did you get a peep at them?"

"No, but we heard them runing away as we crawled out of the tent."

"Too bad they they got off, but I don't suppose it could be helped," Jack sighed.

"Did you get a good look at the feller?" Slats asked.

"Prety fair. He was small and dark with a heavy black mustache."

"Think it was the feller that got inter the hotel?"

"I don't know. You see, I didn't get more'n a glimpse of him, but I reckon it's more'n likely that one of them was he. Don't you think so?"

"I reckon," Slats agreed and Bob nodded his head.

"Then it means that they're following us," Jack affirmed.

"An' it means that we got ter be mightly on the watch from now on," Slats declared.

"You think they'll not give it up now that they know that we are on to them?" Bob asked.

"If thar's one thing more'n another that a Greaser has it's persistence when it comes ter tryin' ter get something without workin' fer it an' so long's they think they have a chance ter steal our stuff, they'll keep after us, leastwise, that's my guess."

"And especially if they've got that map and brains enough to know what it means," Jack said.

"Presactly," Slats agreed.

"Then I reckon one of us'll have to be on watch nights from now on," Bob suggested.

"You bet," Slats assured him. "And I'll take the first watch right now. How you feel, Jack?"

"Pretty good except that my head aches considerable.

"You're lucky ter have got off without a broken head, but a few hours sleep'll fix you all right, I reckon."

Bob and Jack crawled back into the tent and were soon fast asleep. The rain had stopped and a few stars were peeping out between the rifts in the clouds as Slats sat down at the foot of a large tree a few feet in front of the tent.

"I don't reckon as how they'll come back ternight," he thought as he filled his pipe. "But I ain't goin' ter take no chances."

The night passed without further trouble and the boys found breakfast all ready for them when they awoke. Jack assured them that he felt as well as

ever except that the lump on his head was still pretty sore.

It was a beautiful morning with just enough tang to the air to render it invigorating and they started off in good spirits in spite of the knowledge that they were undoubtedly being followed.

"I reckon we're three to their two," Slats had declared, adding: "An' that ought ter give us odds enough ter keep us on the safe side."

At noon they halted beside a large spring for dinner and an hour's rest having made, according to Slats's judgment, about fifteen miles. They had been on the watch every minute and once they had hid themselves behind a huge rock and waited nearly an hour. But no one was seen and the boys began to hope that their enemies had given up the chase and returned to the town. But Slats shook his head.

" 'Tain't like 'em to give up like that," he told them. "But I don't reckon as how we'll see them fer some time. They'll be mighty shy now they know we're on ter their racket. They ain't none too brave them fellers ain't."

About three o'clock they reached the top of the range and, for the rest of the day, their way led over fairly level ground. But it was through dense forest and their only guide was the compass. That night was divided into three watches. Bob stood guard from nine to twelve when he called Jack who

watched until three and Slats finished the night. Nothing occurred to disturb them that night or for several nights following and the boys had almost forgotten their danger although they did not relax their vigilance.

CHAPTER IV.

A MYSTERY.

It was about noon seven days after they had left the town that Slats called a halt on the top of a hill which was bare of trees giving a view of the country for many miles all around. They had made better time than they had expected in spite of the hard going for the most of the way and Slats estimated that they had made nearly if not quite 180 miles in six days, for they had not traveled on the Sabbath.

"Yer see that mountain off thar?" Slats asked, pointing toward the southwest.

"Yep," both boys answered.

"Wall, wait a minute," he told them as he pulled his map from his pocket and spread it out on the top of a flat rock. "Now, unless I'm off my bearin' that mountain's that one right thar," and he placed a finger on an upper corner of the map.

"What makes you think so?" Bob asked.

"Wall, yer se, if we're gone around 180 miles as I reckon, we must be somewhere near the place whar this map begins and yer can see that that's the only mountain on the map and, what's more, it's the only

mountain in sight from here an' I reckon we can see most a hundred miles."

"I believe you're right," Jack exclaimed.

"Same here," Bob agreed.

"Don't see how it can help bein' right," Slats added. "Not lessen we're way out of our course an' I don't think it."

"It's too bad there's no way to tell how far the mine is from the the mountain," Bob said.

"Don't suppose the guy that made the map ever thought about putting in a scale of miles," Jack added.

"I reckon not," Slats shook his head. "But," he added, "I don't reckon as how it's such a much of a ways."

"How far are we from that mountain should you say?"

"Matter o' forty miles more or less."

"You don't mean it," Jack exclaimed. "Why, it doesn't look more than ten at the most."

"But it is," Slats assured him. "In this clear air distances are mighty deceptive let me tell yer an' if we get thar afore ter-morrow night we'll be doin' better nor I expect."

The day was hot and the going rough, but the sight of their destination keyed them up to the point where, for a time they forgot both heat and fatigue and, as soon as dinner was over, they pushed on as

though they had just started. But around four o'clock the burros, not having the same incentive as the boys, began to show signs of fatigue and Slats gave it as his opinion that they had better call it a day.

"I don't mind workin' myself when I'm tired but somehow or other I never could bare ter see a dumb beast imposed on," he told them.

"Right you are," Bob declared as he slid from the back of his mount. "These animals have done all they are going to do today except eat. I was so anxious to get there that I clean forgot that they've been doing all the work. No wonder they're tired."

"And this is a dandy place to camp," Jack joined in. "I'll bet there's trout in that brook."

"If there ain't you go ter bed without any supper so you'd better do some coaxin'," Slats affirmed.

"What do you mean no supper?"

"I mean that after makin' our mouths water that way you'd better deliver the goods, that's all."

"I get you," Jack laughed as he started off with his rod.

Jack did not have to go supperless to bed and neither did the others have to eat a troutless supper. There was a plenty of the speckled dainties and to spare. They found, after the supper was eaten and the dishes washed, that they were more tired than they had thought and darkness had hardly settled

over the forest before the two boys were rolled in their blankets and in the land of Nod. Slats had insisted on taking the first watch and, after some argument, had his way. At eleven o'clock he touched Bob's shoulder and reported that nothing suspicious had been seen or heard.

The night was cloudy and Bob though he had never known a night so dark. Not a breath of air stirred the branches overhead and the only sound was the faint snapping of the fire a few feet from the tent, except when one of the burros stirred. He replenished the fire and then sat down about ten feet away with his back against a large tree.

An hour passed and then another. He had hard work to keep his eyes open during the first hour and actually had to fight with himself before the second hour was up, getting to his feet every few minutes and walking slowly about.

"Gee, I never knew I could be so sleepy," he thought as he got up and stretched for the third time during the last fifteen minutes.

Two minutes after he had resumed his seat he was sound asleep. Some time later he felt a hand touch his left arm. Instantly he was awake and, like a flash, his right hand flew up and grasped the wrist of the hand which had touched him. A low grasp as of pain followed the action and an attempt was made to draw the hand away, but he held on the

while he got to his feet. By the faint glow of the fire he saw, to his great amazement that his captive was a young girl. Too astonished to speak he dropped the wrist and, for a moment stood gazing at the dim form beside him.

"Who—who are you?" he finally whispered.

"It doesn't matter," came the reply, whispered so low that he barely caught the words. "They who are following you are near by and intend to attack you in a short time."

Then, before he could speak again she was gone. How she could disappear so suddenly he could never understand. One minute she was there whispering to him and the next second she had vanished, vanished without a sound to tell which way she had gone. For an instant he wondered if he was dreaming and pinched himself good and hard. A glance at his watch told him that he had only slept a half hour, but the fire had nearly died down. With his mind in a daze he threw some wood on it and, for a moment watched it blaze up. Then, for the first time, the words which the girl had whispered to him struck home with full force.

Galvanized into action by the thought that the blow might fall at any moment he rushed for the tent and shook Slats and Jack one with either hand.

"Where's the fire?" Jack asked as he opened his eyes.

"Who's she to?" Slats grunted.

"Listen, now," Bob whispered, and proceeded to tell them what had happened.

"And I thought prohibition had gone into effect," Jack said when he had finished.

"Talk sense," Bob snapped. "This is no time to be funny."

"You rant about talking sense and then rave about a girl coming from nowhere and returning to the same place just to tell you that we're in danger. You've been dreaming, son," Jack retorted.

"Dreaming nothing. I thought so at first, but I pinched myself."

"What'd this gal look like?" Slats demanded.

"Why, I—I couldn't see her very well, you know, it was so dark," Bob stammered.

"Then yer can't describe her?"

"Well, she wasn't very big and she had a small hand and—"

"Very accurate description that," Jack laughed. "It wouldn't fit more'n about fifty percent of the girls in the world."

"Scoff all you want to later, but just now we'd better get on the job. I believe that girl knew what she was talking about," Bob retorted.

"Assuming that there really was a girl," Jack said in an undertone as he threw off his blanket.

"Hark!"

Just before Slats whispered the warning the hoot of an owl was heard, seemingly only a short distance to their right, and an instant later it was answered by another about the same distance to their left.

"Hear that?" Slats whispered.

"Sure, what of it? It was only a couple of owls," Bob answered.

"But I'll bet it's two legged owls," Slats retorted.

"Most owls are two legged. That is, all I've ever seen were," Jack laughed.

"Yer know what I mean. That wasn't no owl."

"I thought it sounded kind of queer especially the first one," Bob assented.

"You bet it was queer. It was them two guys signaling to each other and it means that they're a goin' to come at us from two sides," Slats told them.

"What'll we do?" Jack asked.

"Git yer guns ready and foller me," Slats ordered as he got on his hands and knees and crept out of the tent. "Keep down low an' it ain't likely they'll see yer."

As soon as they were all outside Slats whispered his orders.

"We'll all go in different directions an' about ten feet from the tent. Then lay flat on the ground an' watch an' listen. If yer see or hear anything shoot but aim high. We don't want ter kill anybody, only let 'em know we're on the lookout."

For perhaps ten minutes there was not a sound. The sky had cleared somewhat and now the moon was shedding a faint light making it possible to see for a distance of several yards. Suddenly a bush, a few feet in front of where Jack was lying, moved suspiciously and, at the same time, a slight rustle caught his ears. Remembering Slat's order he raised his automatic and fired into the air. The crack of the gun in the stillness of the night made a terrific noise and, as the echo died away, he could hear the sound of someone tearing through the dense underbrush in front of his position. For a moment he was undecided whether to give chase or to let the man go, but before he had time to act Slats crept up beside him.

"What 'jer see?" he whispered.

"There was someone out there just behind that bush," Jack told him.

"'Jer see him?"

"I saw the bush move and heard him moving and, after I fired, I heard him running away."

"I reckon they intended ter come at us from both sides."

"Sure they did."

"Wal, now they know we're awake an' on the job I reckon they'll beat it fer awhile at any rate."

"I was just going after that fellow when you came up," Jack said.

"It's a good thing I came then. Why, boy alive, what yer thinkin' of? That feller'd ask nothin' better'n a chance ter put a bullet inter yer. Reckon I'll have ter keep an eye on yer all the time."

"Well, I guess that fellow has skipped. Let's go see if Bob has seen or heard anything," Jack suggested.

Bob reported that he had neither seen or heard a thing except the report of Jack's gun, and they crept back to the tent.

"Them beggars are shore some persistent," Slats declared as he filled his pipe.

"I'll tell the world they are," Jack agreed.

"And now perhaps you'll laugh at my story of the girl," Bob said.

For a moment neither of the others replied.

"But who could she be?" Jack finally asked.

"Ask me something easy," Bob retorted.

"How far do you suppose we are from a town?" Jack asked turning to Slats.

"I dunno. Must be more'n a hundred miles, I reckon. Mebby two hundred."

"Then it's not very likely that she strolled out from the nearest town for a walk in the moonlight," Jack asserted.

"Was she a Greaser?" Slats asked.

"That I can't tell," Bob replied. "You see, it was so dark then and I was so surprised that I

didn't see more than a dim outline of her and she was gone like a flash."

"How do you know it was a girl then?" Jack asked.

"I could tell that much by the sound of her voice and besides the wrist I had hold of was too small for a man's."

"But, great guns, it's absolutely spooky having a girl come at you like that away out here in this wilderness," Jack declared.

"Oh, she was flesh and blood all right," Bob assured him.

"Wal, it'll be about three hours afore daylight an' I reckon you boys might's well turn in. I'll keep watch the rest o' the night," Slats said a few minutes later.

"Yes you will—not," Jack objected. "It's my turn. You and Bob hit the hay and I'll see if I can get a date with the mysterious girl of the woods."

Seeing that Jack was determined, Slats did not press the matter and, after telling him to keep a careful watch and to call them if he heard or saw anything in the least suspicious, he followed Bob into the ent.

Jack replenished the fire, which was almost out, and then took a look at the burros to make sure they were all right, after which he sat down, with his back to a tree about a dozen feet from the tent. He

had had nearly eight hours of sleep and was wide awake so he had no fear that he too might fall asleep. Naturally his mind was full of Bob's adventure with the mysterious forest sprite, as he called her in his thoughts, and he wondered if she would favor him with a visit. But the hours passed and nothing happened and in due time a rosy glow, in the east, told him that day break was at hand. He again built up the fire, careful to make as little noise as possible, and filled the coffee pot with water from the brook. A few minutes later the rest of his catch of trout were sizzling in the frying pan and breakfast was all ready when Slats and Bob emerged from the tent.

By six o'clock they were packed up and ready for the start. But they had gone but a short distance when they realized that the hardest part of their journey lay before them. They were on a gentle decline and the going was becoming more and more difficult owing to the increasing denseness of the undergrowth. The trees grew very close together and between them twined a species of vine which, in places, made a net work of fibers so tough that it was all but impossible to force their way through. In fact, before they had gone more than two miles, they were obliged to dismount and, with the single hatchet which they had included in their stores, cut their way through.

"This isn't exactly what you'd call rapid transit,"

Jack panted as he paused to wipe the sweat from his face.

"They don't need any traffic cops here, that's sure," Bob laughed back. "I wonder how much of this stuff we've got ahead of us," he added.

"If we've got it all the way to the mountain I'm afraid snow'll fly before we get there," Jack declared.

"You forget that we're not in Maine," Bob laughed. "They don't get any snow down here I reckon."

"Well, that's as may be, but one thing's sure, that mountain won't come to us so we've got to go to it vines or no vines."

"Spoken like a philosopher," Bob grinned.

"Well, it wasn't original," Jack retorted.

By noontime they figured that they had not made much over four miles and, as Jack declared, they were all dog tired, including the burros. To add to their discomfort mosquitoes hovered about them in swarms and they seemed to be of a particularly vicious variety.

"These fellows sure have long pants on," Jack declared giving his cheek a slap which left a broad smear of blood on it.

"They're full size, that's a fact," Bob agreed. "It's too bad we didn't think to bring along some antiskeet stuff."

While talking they had been busy with the lunch and while they were eating, Slats suggested that they rest at least two hours.

"We won't gain nothin' by wearin' ourselves out," he declared.

Although the boys chaffed at the delay they recognized the wisdom of his advice and neither of them demurred.

"I'd like to know where all these pesky mosquitoes came from all of a sudden," Jack said a little later giving his cheek another slap. "We haven't been bothered with them much of any until now."

"Reckon it's 'cause we're gettin' lower down," Slats suggested.

"Well, it's going to be a problem how to sleep tonight if they don't let up," Jack declared.

"I know a trick that'll help," Slats encouraged him.

"Going to shoot 'em?" Jack laughed.

"Yep, with smoke," Slats grinned.

"In the tent?"

"Sure, in the tent. Ain't that where we're goin' ter sleep?"

"I hope so," Jack laughed. "But I don't see—"

"Yer don't have ter see till night comes an' then I'll show yer," Slats interrupted.

It was after two o'clock when Slats reckoned that they'd better be movin', but, although the boys

were as anxious as ever to get to the end of their journey, it was with no great show of enthusiasm that they began to load their stuff on the pack burro.

"I don't mind hard work," Jack declared, "but cutting the way through this mess is a job that I'll bet would have made Hercules wish he'd been twins."

"Wal, he was," Slats spoke up.

"How do you know that?" Bob asked quickly.

"How'd I know it? Reckon I knew him an' his twin brother long enough ter know whether they were twins or not. Used ter work on the same ranch with 'em."

"What was the other fellow's name?" Bob asked trying hard to keep a straight face.

"Horatio. Horatio Sims. Hurk an' Horry, as we used ter call 'em looked so much alike that it allays kept us fellers guessing as ter which one looked the most alike. But how'd you happen to know Hurk?" he asked Jack.

"I guess we're talking about different fellows," Jack told him. "The Hercules I was speaking about lived two or three thousand years ago."

"Oh, then I reckon I never knew him."

"I hardly think it likely," Jack smiled.

"Where'd he live?" Slats asked.

"Somewhere in Greece," Jack told him.

"An' was he a strong guy?"

"Some. I'll tell you about him sometime when we have time," Jack promised him.

By this time they were ready to start and Slats went ahead with the hatchet and the others trailed along behind leading the animals. Instead of improving, as they had hoped, the going became more and more difficult and in an hour's time they had not made more than a hundred rods. They took turns wielding the hatchet and each tried to keep up the spirits of the others, but it was plain to all that the effort was a strain. Then, suddenly the growth of vines ceased and the trees thinned out so that they could see the mountain in the distance.

"And we ought to be thankful for that," Jack sang as he wiped his face down which the perspiration was running in streams.

"If it'll only last," Bob cautioned.

"You mean if it only won't begin again," Jack corrected him.

They now mounted the burros and, for some time made good progress the way being fairly open and free from underbrush. It was about an hour after they had mounted when Jack, who at the moment was riding close by his brother's side, reached out and grabbed his arm.

"Look sharp over there to the right," he whispered.

"What is it?" Bob asked quickly.

"Watch a minute and see if you see anything."

"Nothing doing," Bob declared later. "What was it you thought you saw?"

"I thought I saw a girl."

"You sure?"

"No, I said, I thought so. It was only a glimpse and it might have been a bush or something, but I don't think so."

"You've got pretty sharp eyes," Bob declared soberly.

"I know I have and the more I think of it the more I think it was a girl."

"If it was it must be the same one that warned us last night."

"No doubt about that," Jack agreed.

They had not stopped their burros while they talked and when, a moment later, the growth of trees became thicker, Bob slipped from the saddle.

"What now?" Jack asked.

"You lead my donkey and keep right on. I'm going to do a bit of scouting."

"You'll get lost."

"No, I won't. I'll be careful."

"You'd better be."

At the time Slats was some fifty feet ahead of the boys and did not see Bob as he went off to the right dodging from one tree to another. The boy, for some reason, felt sure that Jack had not been mis-

taken and he hoped that he might, at least, be able to catch a sight of the mysterious girl if she was following them. After keeping on in a straight line so far as he was able to judge, for about a hundred feet, he paused to listen. But no sound came to him to indicate the presence of the girl he hoped to see, so he turned and stole softly along in the direction they had been following.

If Jack had really seen her she couldn't have been more than a hundred feet away, he told himself, and it was more than likely that she would keep well within that distance of them. He well knew that he needed to exercise the utmost care in order not to get lost and so, after a few minutes had passed and he had not caught sight of her, he gave the call of the evening thrush, a signal he knew Jack would understand. It was answered at once and from only a short distance away, and in another five minutes he was back and in the saddle.

"Did Slats miss me?" he asked.

"Nope, he never looked back," Jack assured him.

"That's fine."

"Did you see her?"

"No."

"Well," Jack said after a short pause. "That doesn't prove anything. She wouldn't have much trouble in keeping out of your sight if she knew you were following her."

"I suppose not," Bob agreed.

"If there was a girl—" Jack began, but Bob interrupted him.

"Did'nt I tell you I had hold of her last night?"

"I know but—"

"There's no buts about that part of it," Bob insisted. "I tell you there was a girl."

"All right. I don't doubt it. I only meant that she must know her way about here pretty well."

"Of course."

"Then we're not apt to catch her unless she wants to be caught."

"I guess you're right."

"She probably can run like a deer."

"Probably."

"Probably what?" Jack snapped.

"Why, she can probably run. That's what you said wasn't it?"

"Yes, but can't you answer except in monesyllables?"

"Sure."

"Then why don't you?"

"I will if it'll relieve you any," Bob laughed.

"It's getting pretty hard going again," Jack said a little later.

Slats was still quite a distance ahead and as Jack spoke he was out of sight so they hurried their pace to catch up with him, and when they reached him

they were dismayed to find that he had dismounted and was hard at work again cutting a way through vines.

"What do you know about that?" Jack groaned as he slipped to the ground.

Although bad enough they found that the undergrowth was not as dense as that through which they had passed earlier in the day, and they kept in fairly good spirits as they took turns with the hatchet.

"If we get through this afore we get to the mountain and then run inter any more of it, I'm a goin' ter see if I can't find a way round it," Slats declared.

"We could go a good ways around and still make better time," Jack suggested.

"If thar's a way round," Slats said.

They pushed on making their way foot by foot until, at five o'clock Slats declared that he had enough for one day. There had been little if any improvement since they had struck the vines and they doubted if they had made much more than a mile. But they had reached a small stream which worked its way through the dense growth and, as the water was good, it was quickly decided to call it a day and camp for the night.

"We might not find any water fer a good ways," Slats told them as he started to unload.

"But the mosquitoes are still with us," Jack groaned.

"And bigger than ever," Bob added.

"I told yer I'd fix 'em when it's bed time," Slats reminded them.

"And it's going to be bed time for little Jackie as soon as he gets his supper under his belt," Jack declared.

"And the mountain is still a good ways off," Bob sighed.

"But it might be worse," Jack said cheerfully.

"How?" Bob asked.

"Why, it could be twice as far away, you know."

"I suppose that's so. Confound these mosquitoes." And Bob slapped the back of one hand with the other.

CHAPTER V.

A SHOT.

"Now for your mosquito gun, Slats," Jack said as soon as supper was over.

Slats said nothing, but took from the pack a small agate dish and from his pocket a bunch of what looked like some kind of moss. He then picked up a handful of pine needles and filled the dish about half full after which he touched a match to them and waited until they blazed fiercely. He then filled the dish with the moss and almost instantly a dense white smoke poured out. Taking the dish inside the tent he placed it on the ground and, as he came out, said:

"That smoke may bother you a bit at first, but it isn't so bad after yer get used ter it and it's a whole lot better nor them pesky birds."

"But how long will it last?" Jack asked.

"It'll burn fer several hours an' the smoke'll hang round long enough ter keep 'em away all night, I reckon."

A few minutes later Bob and Jack crawled into their blankets and, as Slats had declared, found the smoke not at all unbearable although it was, as Jack

put it, "not exactly pleasant." But there was not a single mosquito in the tent.

The night passed without incident. Slats called Bob at eleven o'clock and he in turn called Jack at three. The next day was the hardest they had encountered. The vines had to be cut away almost every foot of the way and when, all but exhausted, they pitched camp shortly before five o'clock they doubted if they had made five miles.

They had said nothing to Slats about the girl but, throughout the day, the boys had kept a sharp lookout hoping to catch another glimpse of her. But they had been disappointed.

"But I've had a hunch that she was near us all day," Bob whispered.

"Maybe. But what most concerns me is whether or not those two Greasers are still on our trail," Jack replied.

"I'll bet they are."

"And I won't take the bet. We're going to have trouble with those guys before this expedition is through."

That night and the following day nothing unusual happened. The going continued about the same and they made about the same distance. Throughout the day the mosquitoes tormented them outrageously, but thanks to Slats's stink pot, as Jack called it, the tent was free of the pests during the night. Then

came Sunday and they rested all day. Followed three more days of struggling with the vines and then, about three o'clock in the afternoon, the ground began to rise gently and, to their great joy, the growth of vines gradually lessened and by the end of another hour had ceased altogether. The trees still grew so close together that their progress was slow but, compared with the speed they had been making, it seemed, as Jack declared, that they were flying.

They were unable to see more than a few feet ahead but, when they camped that night, Bob climbed to the top of one of the tallest of the trees and shouted down that he could see the mountain and that it did not look to be more than five or six miles away.

No sign of the Greasers or of the mysterious girl had been seen since the night of the threatened attack and, although they had not slacked their vigilance in the slightest degree, they hoped that the former had given up the pursuit. But both boys hoped that they would sooner or later meet the girl who had saved them by her timely warning.

They were off shortly after sunrise the next morning and by eight o'clock drew rein at the foot of the mountain.

"Well, we've done as well as Mohammed," Bob declared as he slipped from his saddle.

"Who's he and what'd he do?" Slats demanded.

"Why he was a man who wanted a mountain to come to him and when it wouldn't he went to the mountain," Bob explained.

"Huh, he must have been a crazy guy ter expect a mountain ter come ter him," Slats declared shaking his head as though he had little time for such a character. "Now, I reckon we'd better take another squint at that map," he added as he pulled the paper from his pocket. "Now, near as I can figger it, we're about here," he said placing a finger on the map. "An' the mine's off in that direction which seems ter be a little east o' south, but it might be five miles from here and then agin it might be twenty-five."

"It's going to be like hunting a needle in a haystack," Jack declared.

"Well, we didn't expect an easy job when we started out," Bob reminded him.

"And I'll tell the world we haven't had it so far," Jack retorted.

"How had we better go at it, Slats?" Bob asked.

Slats pulled out his pocket compass and held it on the palm of his hand.

"South's that way," he said pointing with his free hand. "Now, it seems ter me that the only thing fer us ter do is to move along in about that direction keeping a bit ter the east and hunt fer signs as we go. But one thing we've got ter do an' that is ter

shoot some game. Yer see we've been close on ter a week longer gettin' here nor we calculated on an', while we've still got considerable in the line o' provisions, it ain't goin' ter last fer ever."

"Well we've seen plenty of rabbits and not a few birds which are good eating so I guess we won't starve," Bob said.

"No, I don't reckon we will," Slats agreed. "But we'd better be on the safe side just the same an' we'll have a rabbit stew fer dinner terday if we can git the rabbit."

"Which is the first article in the recipe for rabbit pie," Jack laughed. "But if there are any brooks around here we'll have trout once or twice in awhile," he added.

"Now, we've got ter zig-zag back and fourth as we go so's ter cut a wide swarth or we might miss it," Slats cautioned them as they mounted ready to start on the search.

Although they had little expectation of finding the mine within five miles of the mountain they determined to cover the ground thoroughly from the start and take no unnecessary chances of missing it. So they rode slowly back and forth as they held to a general southerly direction. The forest was still very dense although there was not much underbrush and their progress was slow. A little before eleven o'clock Slats shot a fat rabbit and Jack declared that

they had the first ingredient for the pie. Shortly after they stopped for dinner and all voted the pie a great success.

Just as they were about to start again a shot was heard far off in the forest.

"What was that?" Bob asked.

"Shot from a revolver, a thirty-two, I should say," Jack replied.

"But who do you suppose fired it?"

"I reckon them two Greasers are running low on supplies as well's we are," Slats declared.

"Then they're still on our trail."

"Looks that way."

"And I hoped we'd seen the last of them."

"I didn't expect it," Slats assured him. "I know them kind an' they don't give up so easy like."

"How far off was that shot?" Jack asked.

" 'Bout a mile, I should say, mebby not so far," Slats answered.

"Well, here's hoping he missed," Jack declared as he started on the hunt again.

About five o'clock they came to a small brook and decided to call it a day, having covered, they judged, about five miles from the mountain in a straight line. Jack got out his fishing tackle and a half hour later returned with enough trout for supper. No other shot had been heard, but all felt that a real danger threatened them and, although they each tried to

appear cheerful for the sake of the others, it was a rather sober trio that gathered about the fire to eat.

"The guard'll have ter keep his eyes open ter-night an' every night," Slats declared as he helped himself to another trout, and Bob felt the hot blood rush to his face as he remembered that he had been the one to go to sleep while on watch.

"I've got an idea," he said a moment later.

"Good, let's have it," Slats said.

"Well, I was just thinking. Those fellows are undoubtedly still after us or the mine which means the same thing. Now, what's the use in sitting still and waiting for them to attack us as they will sooner or later?"

"You mean we ought to attack them?" Jack asked as he paused.

"Well, I don't know's I meant exactly that, but why wouldn't it be a good plan to do a little scouting after it gets dark and try to find out where they are and what they're up to?"

"I'm with you, son. What do you say, Slats?"

"I dunno," Slats replied slowly. "Seems ter me that it's kinder risky."

"Nothing ventured nothing have," Bob quoted.

"But what'll we do if we find 'em?" Slats asked. "We can't shoot 'em in cold blood, can we?"

"Hardly that but isn't it possible that, if we can

find them, we could scare them away? They're more or less superstitious, aren't they?"

"You mean scared of spooks an' seech things?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

"No more'n most folks they ain't. Course they'd likely run of they'd see a ghost or anything o' that sort, but I reckon you'd have ter go some ter throw a scare inter them right now."

"Then you think we'd better not try to find them?"

"I ain't a sayin' that. I'd kinder like ter know myself whar they are and what they're up to, only I wouldn't count too much on scarin' 'em none."

"And do you think we could find them?"

"I dunno, but we can try."

"That's the spirit of seventy-six," Jack cried. "Try never was licked, you know."

"How'll we go about it?" Bob asked as he rose and stood looking at the others who were still eating.

"I think you'd better let me do the lookin'," Slats said.

"And we stay here? Not much," Jack protested.

"Then we'll have ter keep tergether," Slats insisted. "Yer see Jeb put the responsibility of bringin' yer back safe an' sound on me an' I ain't a goin' ter fall down on the job if I can help it, an' it wouldn't be safe fer yer ter be prowlin' round these woods alone after dark."

"I guess you're right there," Bob agreed and I move we all go together."

"Second the motion," Jack said as he cleaned the last morsel from his plate.

They waited until it was fairly dark and then, after seeing that the burros were securely fastened, they started off through the woods in the direction in which they had heard the shot.

"It ain't likely that they're more'n a half mile away at the most and they may be a lot nearer so we want ter go mighty easy like," Slats cautioned them.

The sky was clear and thickly studded with stars so that it was not absolutely dark even in the thick woods. They knew that the moon would not rise for another two hours and they hoped to find them before then. Like shadows they crept along making not the slightest sound and stopping every few feet to listen.

"What are you smelling?" Bob asked Slats the second time they stopped.

"Haven't you noticed that the wood we've been burnin' gives off a funny smell?" he in turn asked.

"Sure, I have."

"Wal, if they've got a fire or had one we might smell it farther nor we could see it."

"That's right. It's our best bet, isn't it?"

"I reckon so, that is if the wind's right."

But no warning odor reached their nostrils as they

went on neither did they hear a sound which indicated the presence of their enemies and, after an hour had passed, Slats declared that he did not think it best to go any further from the camp.

"We've missed 'em or else we didn't take the right direction at all," he told them. "We must be most a mile from camp and it ain't likely they'd be so far away."

They were standing close together beneath the branches of a large tree as Slats spoke and he had just finished when a slight sound, which seemed to come from over their heads, arrested their attention.

"What was that?" Bob whispered.

Before either of the others could answer another sound, this time more distinct, reached their ears.

"Hist!"

"There's someone up there," Jack whispered trying in vain to pierce the thick branches with his eyes.

"Listen."

The word came clear and distinct.

"One of the men you are trying to find has seen you and has gone to tell his companion."

The words were spoken in a soft, but clear tone and in excellent English.

"Get back to your tent as quickly as you can."

For a moment they waited to hear more, but that was all. The silence of the tomb pervaded the forest.

"Who are you?" Bob asked as loudly as he dared.

There was no answer.

"I'm going up there," Jack whispered, but Slats caught him by the arm.

"Not much you ain't. Didn't you hear what she said? We've got to beat it and beat it fast. Come on."

Both Bob and Jack were expert in finding their way through the forest, but the almost uncanny way in which Slats led them back won their complete admiration. Never stopping and never hesitating for an instant, he guided them through the trackless forest until, much sooner than they expected, they stood once more by their tent. Everything was in order and Slats breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"You were afraid they'd beat us to it?" Bob asked.

"I sure was that."

"Well, it seems they didn't," Jack said thankfully.

"An it's a mighty lucky thing fer us they didn't," Slats told them. "If they'd got here first and stole our animals and provisions it'd a bin a mighty serious thing fer us, let me tell you."

"I'll say it would," Bob agreed.

"But do you suppose they'll come now?" Jack asked anxiously.

"I dunno, but we're here fust," Slats replied grimly.

"And possession is nine points in the law," Bob assured them.

"Meanin' that they'd have a sweet time in gettin' our belongin's away from us when we on the job, eh?"

"Exactly," Bob grinned.

They decided that they would all stay awake until at least twelve o'clock and soon they were lying on the ground close together discussing the events of the evening. They had decided not to build up the fire deeming it advisable to make it as difficult as possible for the Greasers to see them in case they came.

"One thing is sure at any rate," Bob said.

"What's that?" Jack asked.

"That there was a girl."

"No doubt about it, son. In fact I never did really doubt it."

"And I don't believe she's a Greaser."

"You mean a Greaseress, don't you?"

"Well, she spoke as good English as I ever heard."

"That's a fact, now you mention it."

"It's a mighty strange thing, that girl, I mean," Slats declared.

"It's worse than that," Jack assured him.

"But she was up a tree."

"And she has nothing on us when it comes to that," Bob chuckled.

"I'm talkin' sense," Slats growled. "How'd she get up that tree?"

"Probably climbed."

"But, hang it all, that tree was all of four feet through and the lowest branch was not lessen twelve feet from the ground. How'd she get up it? That's what I want ter know."

"Perhaps she came into it from another tree close by. That's the way Tarzan of the Apes did, you know," Bob suggested. "Were there any other trees near enough?"

"I didn't notice," Slats said slowly. "Thar might have been an' I guess likely yer struck it."

"Unless she's got wings," Jack laughed.

"Well, our expedition didn't amount to much," Bob declared a few minutes later.

"I'm not so sure about that," Jack said slowly. "I reckon they know that we aren't afraid of them."

"Which may or may not be a good thing," Bob declared.

Twelve o'clock came at last and nothing had been heard of their enemies, and Slats ordered the boys to crawl into the tent and go to sleep.

"We'll take two hour shifts watchin' an' I'll take the fust one."

They both knew that it would accomplish nothing to argue the point with him so they lost no time in obeying. Fortunately there were no mosquitoes to

bother them that night though they were at a loss to understand their absence.

"The quicker we have a set-to with those fellows and find out who's best man the better I'll like it," Jack whispered as he rolled in his blanket. "This not knowing where you're at gets on my nerve."

It was daylight when they awoke. Slats had a fire going, when they crawled sheepishly out of the tent, and had breakfast nearly ready.

"What's the big idea?" Bob asked grabbing the cowboy by the arm.

"Shore now," he drawled, "yer looked so peaceful that I hadn't the heart to wake yer."

"That's what we get by not making him promise to play fair before we went to bed," Jack said.

"Never mind it's all right. I wasn't tired and the loss of a night's sleep means nothing in my young life" he assured them.

"All right, but we'll see that it doesn't happen again," Bob assured him.

They had decided, the night before, to make their present camp a more or less permanent one as they felt sure that they could not be many miles away from the mine and it would be less work to hunt during the day and come back at night than to move their stuff every day. The place was ideal for a camp being close to a good sized stream which Jack was sure must have plenty of trout waiting for him,

and the absence of the troublesome mosquitoes was not a small factor in their decision. The one thing which had caused them to hesitate regarding the plan was the fear that the two Mexicans might find their camp and steal their supplies, and they had finally decided that one of them should, at all times, stay as a guard to the camp while the other two searched. Slats, at first demurred at the thought of the two boys going off alone, but they soon convinced him that, with the compass, there was no danger of them getting lost.

Bob was to stay at the camp the first day and, as soon as breakfast was over Slats and Jack were ready to start off.

"We're going ter make the search thorough as we go along," Slats told him as Bob started to clear up the breakfast things. "An' it ain't likely we'll go more'n two or three miles away so if yer want us jest fire two shots close together an' we'll come a running."

"I'll do that," Bob assured him.

"An' keep yer eyes peeled," he cautioned.

"I'll do that too."

For an hour after they left him, Bob was busy straightening up things after which he watered the burros at the brook and then, having seen that they were hobbled so that there was no danger of their straying far away, he allowed them to browse on the

grass, which was abundant near the bank of the stream. All the time he kept a sharp watch on all sides, knowing that the Mexicans might appear at any time. But, being well armed, he was not afraid provided they did not get the drop on him. It was very lonesome there all by himself and, after he had eaten his lunch, he decided that he might as well do a bit of searching on his own hook just so he kept within sight of the camp. It was fairly open there and he found that he could go nearly a hundred yards and still have a good view of the tent. So for two hours he searched, looking behind every clump of bushes for a possible opening which might prove to be the entrance to the mine. He had the idea that, in case they did find it, its entrance would be small and well hidden in some way, otherwise it would have been located long ago, he reasoned.

But he found nothing and, having covered as much space as he dared, he finally gave it up. As he sat on a log near the tent, a little later, whittling a piece of wood for the want of something better to do, a feeling that he was being watched gradually stole over him. What caused it he was unable to tell, but it was there. Someone's eyes were following his every movement he felt sure but, although he scanned the woods all about him, he was unable to detect the watcher. The strange feeling persisted until he finally got up from the log and started

to walk about striving to make it appear that he was simply killing time, but in reality every sense was on the alert and often he stopped and stood as though meditating on something. But it was all in vain. No sound or glimpse betrayed the watcher if, indeed there was one, and finally he gave it up deciding that his nerves were making him imaginative.

A little before five Slats and Jack returned and reported a complete failure so far as finding the mine was concerned.

"But we've covered quite a lot of ground," Jack told his brother.

"Anything happened?" Slats asked.

It was on the tip of Bob's tongue to tell them all about his sensation of being watched but, on second thought, he decided to say nothing about it. So he shook his head and assured them that he had not been disturbed.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PYRAMID IN THE WOODS.

THE night passed without incident and, as soon as the early breakfast was over, Bob and Jack were ready to set out, Slats having been elected to do guard duty for the day.

"Now yer want ter be mighty careful," he cautioned them. "If yer get lost or anything happens ter yer Jeb'll stretch my skin on the wall of the bunk house."

"Not quite so bad as that, I guess," Bob laughed. "But we'll be careful."

"An' don't try ter cover too much ground. I don't want yer ter get too far away."

"We'll be good," Jack assured him.

The day before, with the hatchet, they had blazed the trees at frequent intervals, on both sides of a tract about forty feet wide which they had searched foot by foot and it had been planned that the boys should search a like tract just to the east. The land they were searching was not heavily wooded, indeed the trees were far apart, but between them was a thick growth of bushes which, for the most part, grew in clumps, and they knew that any one of them

might hide the entrance to the mine. So it was slow work as they had determined to make the search so thorough that there would be no need of going over the ground a second time. When, at noon time, they stopped to eat their lunch, they reckoned that they were about a mile or possibly a little more from the camp.

"That needle in the haystack's got nothing on this," Jack declared as he bit into a sandwich.

"Well, we didn't expect to find it in a minute, you know."

"I suppose not, but do you really think we'll find it at all?"

"Seriously, I doubt it," Bob said.

"You think the map's a fake?"

"Hardly that."

"Then why shouldn't we find it?"

"Perhaps we will. I only said what I think."

"Well, if it's here we're going to find it," Jack declared with a snap of his eyes which Bob knew meant determination.

"That's the talk," he smiled. "It won't be our fault if we don't succeed."

Before they started in again, Bob told his brother about the sensation he had experienced the day before and it was evident that Jack was deeply impressed.

"Do you suppose it was those Greasers or that girl?" he demanded.

"I had no way of telling, you know. I didn't see anyone."

"Sure it wasn't your imagination?"

"Of course I'm not sure. How could I be? But I really think someone was watching me."

"So do I. You don't have those feelings for nothing. You aren't the nervous kind, you know." Jack assured him.

"I never thought I was," Bob agreed.

It was about an hour later that Jack, who at the moment, was some thirty feet from Bob, shouted:

"Here a minute, Bob."

"What is it?" Bob asked as he reached his brother's side.

Jack pointed to a clump of bushes, just to his right, about twenty feet across and nearly circular in shape.

"Take a look in there," he ordered.

Bob stepped quickly forward and pushed his way through the thick growth. What he saw fairly made him gasp, for there, in the center of the clump, was a huge pile of rocks in the shape of a rough pyramid. Its top was fully twenty feet from the ground and its base covered not less than 200 square feet.

"What do you think of it?" Jack asked, close behind him.

For a moment Bob did not reply. He stood looking at the huge pile as though spellbound.

"Well?"

"I'll say so."

"Say so what?"

"I'll say it's well," Bob declared excitedly.

"You mean it's it?"

"You mean the mine?"

"Of course. What'd you think I meant?"

"Well, it may be and then again it may not be. Maybe it's only an old altar or something of the sort, but it looks encouraging, don't you think?"

"Well, it's the first thing we've found that could be it so of course it's encouraging."

While talking they had been moving slowly around the pile examining it closely from all sides.

"Don't see anything which looks like an entrance," Bob declared when they had completed the circuit.

"Nor I," Jack agreed.

"But, of course, that doesn't mean that there isn't one, not necessarily."

"Looks to me as though we'd need dynamite to get into it," Jack asserted. "Those stones are big all right. I don't believe there's one of them that weighs less than five hundred pounds."

"But they're not cemented. That's one good thing."

"Sure is, but what'd we better do?"

"I think the best plan is to get right back to camp and tell Slats and move every thing down here. It's going to be a long job to get inside that pile even if we can do it which I rather doubt."

Before Jack could reply a slight sound behind them caused them to turn quickly and both caught sight of a face framed by thick bushes only a few feet distant. It was gone instantly, however, and for an instant, the two boys looked at each other.

"Did you see it?" Jack whispered.

"Sure," Bob whispered back.

"Well, come on, let's get after him."

"Not so fast, son. Remember he'd probably as soon shoot us as eat," Bob reminded him.

"But he didn't."

"And why didn't he?"

"Blest if I know, do you?"

"Did you get a good look at him?" Bob asked.

"No, now you mention it, I didn't. Only a glimpse."

"And are you sure it was a man?"

"You mean—?"

"I mean that I couldn't really say whether it was a man's face or that of a girl," Bob told him.

"Then you think it was the girl and not one of the Greasers?"

"I think it might have been. It vanished so quickly that I'm not able to say which it was.

"But the fact that we're still living seems to argue that it was the girl, don't you think?"

"Perhaps," Bob said slowly.

"It's a good bet anyhow. Come on, let's get back as quick as possible and get Slats and the things."

"But suppose it was one of those Greasers?"

"Well, I reckon they can't steal the thing."

"No, but remember, possession is nine points in the law."

"That's all right but we've got to take that risk. Come on."

It was a couple of excited boys that burst in on Slats a half hour later.

"We've found it," Jack shouted.

"You mean it?" Slats asked eagerly.

"Well, we're not so sure," Bob explained. "But we've found something which we think may be it." And he proceeded to tell him what they had found.

Slats said nothing until he had finished then he looked up and asked:

"And you don't have an idea as ter whether it was the girl or the Greaser yer saw?"

"No, we really haven't," Bob replied. "As I told you the face snatched itself away so quick that

neither of us caught more than the slightest glimpse of it. But, from what we've told you, what's your guess?"

"That it was the girl," Slats replied without hesitation.

"That's the way it looks to me," Bob agreed and Jack nodded his head.

"Wal, the best thing we can do is ter get thar right pronto," Slats said as he started taking down the tent.

The work of packing up was, under the circumstances, one of minutes and in less than a half hour from the time they returned they were on their way back. Bob, who was in the lead, stopped as soon as he was within about a hundred yards of the place and waited for the others to come up, knowing that a few more yards and they would be visible to anyone who might be watching from the clump of bushes which surrounded the mound of stones.

"You wait here a minute and I'll see how the land lies," he told them as he slipped from his burro and handed the reins to Jack.

Getting down on his hands and knees he crept from one clump of bushes to another keeping, so far as he was able, a clump between him and the big pile of stones. Every few feet he stopped to listen but no sound came to him. This did not greatly encourage him as he well knew that in case the

Greasers had taken possession of their find, they would be waiting to take them by surprise. Soon he was close to the clump and, putting the bushes ahead, he crawled slowly through and, in another minute, was peeping out at the huge pile of stones. No one was in sight nor was there any sound to indicate the presence of anyone. Realizing that there were four sides to the pile he quickly drew back and skirted the bushes until he had had a good view of all four sides.

"There's no one there," he thought, "unless they've seen me and have moved so as to keep the stones between themselves and me. But I've got to risk that."

So he hurried back and announced the result of his investigation to the others.

"Of course, I can't be sure as I could only see one side of it at a time, but I don't think there's anyone there," he told them.

"Wal, here's hopin' yer're right, but we want ter be mighty careful jest the same," Slats cautioned them as they started forward again.

Nothing happened as they rode up to the place and, at Bob's suggestion, they repeated his previous scrutiny all together so that they covered three sides at the same time. Then, at a signal from Bob, they boldly pushed their way through the bushes holding their revolvers ready for instant action. But there was no one in the little clearing and, with sighs of

relief, they shoved the revolvers back in their pockets.

"Well, what do you think of our find?" Bob asked.

"It's sumpin' all right, but as ter its bein' the mine, wal—it don't look much like any mine I ever saw an' that's a fact. Not that I want ter discourage yer, but it ain't hardly what I was expectin'."

"But you must remember that the mine we're looking for was worked several hundred years ago and, of course, there would be no modern machinery lying around. It was all hand work in those days," Bob told him.

"Maybe so," Slats replied doubtfully. "Anyhow, I'll admit as how it's worth investigatin'."

"Well, I move that we take the rest of the day in getting settled and in locating water. It looks like we'll be here for some time and we are not going to get inside that thing in a minute," Jack proposed.

The others readily fell in with the suggestion and it was quickly decided to pitch the tent close by the side of the pyramid. The space within the surrounding bushes was thickly carpeted with grass, assuring fodder for the burros for some days at least.

"You two get the tent up and I'll see what I can find in the way of water," Bob proposed.

He remembered that they had crossed no streams during the day so he started off in the opposite direction from which they had come. As he went along

he kept a sharp watch all about him for he was by no means convinced that the Mexicans were not close at hand although he really believed now that the face they had seen belonged to the mysterious girl and not to one of their enemies.

"It's going to be mighty inconvenient if there's no water near by," he thought.

But his fears were groundless for he had not gone a hundred feet before he heard the sound of running water and in another minute he was standing by the side of a small, but clear stream.

"Well, that settles the water question," he said half aloud as he started back to tell the good news to the others.

Although he had been gone but a few minutes he found that Slats and Jack had the tent nearly up and, with his help, they were settled inside of an hour.

"If you'll start a fire, Jack, I'll take the burros down for a drink. It's a bit early for supper, but I'm hungry," Bob suggested as soon as they had everything in shape.

"Go to it," Jack agreed. "You'll find the fire going by the time you get back. By the way," he added, as Bob was starting off, "did that brook look as though there were any trout in it?"

"You'll have to drop 'em a line to find out, but I guess you'll find 'em at home all right," Bob laughed.

"All right. I feel as though I could masticate a few for supper so as soon's I get the fire going I think I'll address them."

"You go ahead right now an' I'll build the fire," Slats broke in adding: "But if yer come back without what yer're goin' after it'll be a sorry day fer yer let me tell yer."

"Well, it hasn't happened yet so I should worry," Jack laughed as he began to rummage for his tackle.

After the supper, which included a plentiful supply of fried trout, they sat about the fire, for the evening was cool, and, as Jack proposed, began to discuss ways and means.

"That ere's a mighty solid lookin' pile of rocks, if yer should ask me," Slats began. "How yer reckon we're goin' ter start ter work ter see if it's got any insides?"

"That's a big question," Bob replied slowly. "It sure doesn't look as though we'd be able to move any of those stones with our hands. But I've been doing some thinking and it seems to me more than likely that if it is the entrance to the mine that there's a secret entrance somewhere."

"You mean through the rocks?" Jack asked.

"Of course."

"But I didn't see any opening, did you?"

"Of course not. It wouldn't have been a secret if you could see it, would it?"

"I suppose not, but—"

"What I meant is that there may be a stone that is moved by a secret lever or something of the sort," Bob interrupted.

"An' yer think as how we'd better hunt fer that fust thing?" Slats asked.

"That's my idea."

"An' it's a mighty good one."

"Even though not very promising," Jack added.

"Don't be pessimistic," Bob scowled.

"You know I'm not," Jack retorted. "But it looks like a forlorn hope to me."

"But don't you think it's worth trying?"

"Sure. Try anything once. That's my motto," Jack laughed.

"How about this fire?" Bob asked, turning to Slats. "Don't you think we'd better let it go out?"

"How come?" Slats asked.

"Seems to me it makes pretty good targets of us," Bob told him.

"Mebby you're right. Out it is. No sort of use in takin' chances," and Slats threw a bucket of water on the coals which completely extinguished them.

They turned in early resolved to be up and on the job as soon as it was light enough to see. As usual Slats took the first watch, but Bob made him promise that he would call him at twelve o'clock.

It was shortly after eleven o'clock when Bob

awoke with a suddenness which brought him to a sitting position. He knew that he heard a shot, but whether near by or from a great distance he could not say. For a moment he listened and, when it was not repeated, he reached over in the darkness to touch Jack. But, greatly to his surprise, his hand encountered nothing but the blanket.

"Jack," he whispered.

But there was no reply and, reaching beneath his blanket, he found his flashlight and quickly snapped it on. Save for himself the tent was empty. Not as yet alarmed, however, he crawled out of the tent and, getting to his feet, glanced about. It was very dark as the night was cloudy, and he could see only a few feet from where he stood.

"Slats," he called softly.

"What's bitin' yer?" came the reply from just around the corner of the pyramid, and, an instant later, Slats was by his side.

"Did you hear a shot a minute ago?"

"Yep."

"Was it near?"

"Nope, not very. Quarter mile away I reckon."

"Where's Jack?"

"Jack? In the tent ain't he," Slats's voice expressed his surprise.

"No, he isn't," Bob, now thoroughly alarmed, told him. "Haven't you seen him?"

"Not since yer went ter bed, I ain't."

"It's the strangest—" Bob began and then broke off suddenly as another shot rang through the forest.

"Sufferin' cats! What's it mean?" Slats exclaimed.

"I—I don't know," Bob answered weakly. "What do you think?"

"I ain't had time ter think, not yet. How'd he get away without me knowin' it, I'd like ter know."

"But why did he go? That's what gets me."

"Me too. Don't seem's so he could a bin kidnapped."

"It hardly seems possible," Bob agreed. "But wait a minute and see if I can raise him." And the next moment the clear sweet notes of the evening thrush floated out over the forest.

Eagerly they listened. Bob knew that his brother would understand the signal and reply if he heard it and it was possible to do so. But no answering notes came back and after a full minute had passed, he said with a heavy sigh:

"He's either a good ways off or else they've got him."

"Who's got him?" Slats demanded.

"Why, the Mexicans, of course."

"But it's plumb foolish ter think that they could

come right in here and carry him off and not make a bit of noise. Wouldn't he a yelled?"

"I'd have thought so, but isn't it equally foolish to think that he would go away by himself and not tell either of us that he was going?"

"Maybe so. It's mighty quare either way yer look at it."

"But we must do something," Bob insisted. "Just think, he may be out there wounded or dead for all we know."

"Well, get yer gun and flashlight an' we'll be on the way. I've got mine," Slats told him and in another minute they were stealing silently, but rapidly through the dark forest in the direction in which they judged the sound of the shot had come.

CHAPTER VII.

SLATS HAS A NARROW ESCAPE.

As they hurried along as rapidly as they dared each hoped to hear another shot which would tell them that they were going in the right direction and, at the same time, they dreaded its recurrence because of what it might mean.

"Don't you think we've come a quarter mile?" Bob asked some ten minutes later.

"Prutty near, I should say."

"Then wait and I'll give the signal again."

But again there was no reply and Bob's heart sank lower if such a thing were possible.

"I'm scared," he confessed.

"Same here," Slats whispered back. "Thar's no use splittin' straws, sumpin's happened."

Slats had hardly spoken the words when a loud report made Bob jump nearly a foot in the air and he heard his companion give a surprised grunt and the next instant he heard his body strike the ground.

"Slats!"

There was no reply and, for an instant, the boy's head swam as the thought that they had killed Slats raced through his brain. He realized that in the

darkness it must have been more or less of a chance shot and he did not dare use his light for fear of drawing another. So he threw himself on the ground and crawled toward the place where he knew Slats had fallen. It was only a few feet and, as soon as his hand touched the body which was lying on its back, he rested his head on his chest. The heart was beating and strongly, he thought. He was not dead, that much was certain and the boy breathed a prayer of thankfulness. But how badly was he wounded? If only he dared use his light. But that, he realized, might be fatal for both of them and he wisely resisted the temptation.

"Slats!" He whispered the name as loudly as he dared, but the man gave no sign of having heard.

Quickly he ran his hands over the body and was somewhat encouraged when he could feel no trace of blood. Again he bent his head to his chest and was rejoiced to know that there was no weakening in the beats of his heart.

"It's strange," he thought. "That bullet must have struck him, but his heart is as strong as ever it was so far as I can judge."

He had heard no sound since the shot and now, for the first time, he wondered what had become of the one who had fired the shot. Had he gone or was he biding his time close at hand ready to fire again when a sound gave him a clue as to the proper direc-

tion? For himself he was not frightened for he knew that in the darkness there was slight chance of his being hit even though the man did fire again. To be sure Slats had been hit but, he told himself, it was a chance in a thousand.

Just then he heard a low moan.

"Slats!" he whispered.

The body moved slightly and there was another low groan.

His heart beating rapidly with hope, Bob called his name again and this time there was an answer.

"What kicked me?"

It came in a tone so low that Bob hardly caught the words.

"Where are you shot?" he asked eagerly.

"Who said I was shot?"

The voice was now much stronger and before Bob could speak again he heard the other rise to a sitting position.

"I thought you were killed," Bob sobbed.

"Who, me? Not so's yer'd notice it, but sumpin' kicked me in the head."

"Quiet," Bob cautioned.

"Feel thar," Slats whispered, as he took Bob's hand and guided it to the top of his head.

Bob's hand encountered a lump nearly as large as a hen's egg, but his heart leaped for joy as he realized that his friend was not badly hurt.

"The bullet must have just touched the top of your head," he whispered joyfully. "It didn't even break the skin."

"But I reckon it lifted it some," Slats chuckled. "I allays knew I had a hard head, but I reckon it must be solid ivory ter turn a bullet that away."

"It's a mighty lucky thing it wasn't a fraction of an inch lower," Bob told him. "How do you feel now?"

"All right 'ceptin' fer a kind of a headache."

"Keep quiet awhile," Bob advised.

"Quiet nothin', I'm wuth a dozen dead men right now. Have yer heard anything since I was hit?"

"Not a sound."

"What's fussin' me is how in thunder that feller could see ter shoot so's ter hit anything."

"I don't imaging he did see. Probably he heard us and just let drive in the direction of the sound and then beat it."

"Guess yer're right."

"I think so."

"Wal, what's next? I'm as good's ever now."

The excitement had, for the time being, driven the thought of Jack from Bob's mind and now Slats's question brought the knowledge back to him with almost crushing force, and his voice trembled as he replied.

"I only wish I knew what to do. You—you don't

suppose they've —they've—" he could not speak the word and stopped, but Slats knew what he meant and replied:

"Course they ain't. What'd they want ter do that fer? Tell me that."

Although Bob knew full well that the man was doing his best to cheer him up somehow the words did put some encouragement into his heart and his voice was stronger as he said:

"I guess we might as well go back and wait till daylight. They know that we're hunting them and so our chances of finding them in the dark are about zero."

That had been Slats's opinion from the first, but he wished the suggestion to come from Bob.

"I reckon yer're right thar, son. We can't do him no good till it gets so we can see sumpin," he said soberly.

So they slowly made their way back to the camp hardly a word being spoken until they reached it. Then Bob said:

"We must try and pick up their trail just as soon as it gets light enough to see."

"An' we'll find it, too," Slats assured him.

Bob knew that he would not be able to sleep and so proposed to Slats that he would stand watch, but Slats scouted the idea that he could close his eyes under the circumstances, so they sat through the

long hours until the dawn began to paint the eastern sky. Never had a night seemed so long to the boy torn as he was with anxiety for his brother. He pictured him lying out there in the deep forest with a bullet hole through his body and again as taken captive and being put to the most grevious torture to make him disclose what he knew about the lost mine. But daylight came at last and, after drinking a cup of hot coffee and snatching a hasty bite of bread they were ready for the start.

"We'll go back there where that fellow shot you and see if we can pick up his trail," Bob proposed as he threw a bucket of water on the fire.

"An' we want ter keep our eyes peeled," Slats cautioned as he led the way.

They were only a few minutes in reaching the spot having no difficulty in finding the place where Slats had fallen but, though they searched for the better part of an hour with all the skill of trained woodsmen, not a trace could they find to tell them which way their enemies had gone.

"What are we going to do?" Bob asked for the sixth or seventh time during the past ten minutes.

"Jest keep huntin' I reckon," Slats replied as he had each time the question had been asked.

"But we're getting nowhere," Bob complained.

"I know it seems so, but we may hit it any minute."

"Do you think it would be any use to go back to the camp and try to pick the trail up from there?" Bob asked a few minutes later.

"It might. No harm ter try if we don't strike sumpin' here afore long."

"But we've been over every inch of this ground with a fine tooth comb and if they were here they must have had wings."

"Or been up a tree," Slats suggested.

"But they could hardly have had Jack up a tree," Bob suggested.

"Wal, maybe they didn't have him here."

"They couldn't have had but where is he?"

"Shore, an' I wish I could tell yer that."

They searched for another ten minutes and then, by mutual consent, started back for the camp to see if a clue could be obtained at that point. But here too disappointment awaited them for, although they searched long and minutely, they found nothing.

"It's maddening to be so helpless," Bob groaned as he threw himself down in front of the tent. "If we could only do something, but what is there to do when we don't know in which direction he is?"

"Now don't you go gettin' discouraged," Slats soothed. "I've knowed sicker cats nor this ter get well. Did he ever walk in his sleep?" he asked suddenly.

"No, never," Bob assured him.

"Then I guess that knocks that theory into a cocked hat."

"Theories are no good now," Bob groaned. "Action is what I want."

"Wal, then, let's go get it," Slats cried taking the boy by the arm and pulling him to his feet. "I reckon if we cruise about some we may hit sumpin' an' anyhow, it's better nor sittin' here doin' nuthin'."

"But where'll we go?"

"Jest hit or miss like. I reckon one way's good's another."

"I don't believe they've taken him off very far," Bob declared as they started off toward the brook.

"Nor do I," Slats agreed.

They followed the course of the little stream for about two miles watching every foot of the way for a sign that someone had passed over the ground and then Slats proposed that they swing off to the west giving it as his opinion that they were far enough away from the camp.

"Slats, we forgot to feed the burros and to give them a drink," Bob said about an hour later.

"Now, what jer know about that? Wasn't that plumb silly?"

"Well, they won't suffer for a few hours, I guess, but I suppose we ought to head back and tend to them."

"I reckon. I can go without food or drink fer

a long time myself, but I shore do hate ter think of a dumb beast doin' it."

They returned to the camp about half an hour later and found the animals very restless and lost no time in attending to their wants. It was nearly noon and, before starting off again, they cooked and ate a hurried meal knowing that there was no telling what they might run up against or how long it might be before they would eat another for Bob declared that he would never give up the search until Jack was found.

They were about to start off again when the sound of a distant shot made Bob catch Slats by the arm.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

"Shore."

"Where was it?"

"Off that way," pointing toward the south.

"You sure?"

"Sartin'. Yer can't fool me on directions."

"How far away?"

"Mile, I reckon."

"Then come on, and make it snappy."

Bob led the way at a run through the thick border of bushes and Slats followed close to his heels. It was the first clue they had had and both were determined to make the best of it. The trees were not very close together and there was but little underbrush so they were able to make good time. But

they had gone but a short distance when another shot brought Bob to a stop.

"That sounds as far away as the other," he declared.

"Jest about," Slats panted.

"Then we must be going in the wrong direction."

"Or the feller's been goin' the same direction's we have," Slats suggested.

"You think that's it?"

"More'n likely. We been goin' in the right direction all right."

"Then come on," and Bob started off again at an even faster pace.

No more shots were heard and soon they were obliged to slow down their pace a bit for it was hard running as the footing was none too firm and, besides being nearly winded, both knew that there was great danger of turning an ankle and that would be most disastrous just then. But they still hurried on at a fast walk resolved that their quarry should not escape them.

"We must have come more'n a mile," Bob panted a little later.

"Reckon we have that," Slats agreed.

He had hardly spoken when a shot, fired so close to them that both jumped, caused Bob to grab Slats by the arm and whisper:

"Behind that tree quick."

The tree which he pointed out was a very large one and only about six feet away so in an instant both were crouching behind its friendly trunk.

"That shot was only a few feet off," Bob whispered.

"You said it," Slats whispered back.

A moment later Bob, peeping out from behind the tree, saw a bush, about ten feet away, move and the next moment one of the Mexicans stepped into view. He was the smaller of the two, assuming that one of them was the man who had tried to rob them in the hotel, and, in his hand he carried a short barreled rifle while a couple of partridges hung from his belt. It was birds, then, at which he had been shooting and not his brother, was the thought which flashed through the boy's mind as he watched the man who was backing slowly toward them keeping his eyes fixed on the bush through which he had just pushed his way. Bob nudged his companion as a signal to keep quiet and, almost at the same time, sprang from behind the tree.

Slats afterward declared that it was a beautiful tackle but, at the time, effectiveness was what Bob was after and, as his arms closed about the man's knees, he came to the ground with a loud grunt of surprise, the rifle flying from his hands and landing several feet away. But the two had hardly fallen to the ground before a third actor arrived to take part

in the drama. Slats, from his position, heard an angry snarl and, to his consternation, glanced up just in time to see a huge reddish brown body sailing through the air to land squarely on the two figures before him. Neither of the two on the ground were aware of the presence of the animal until it landed and then, as Slats after declared, "there shore was some doin's."

To say that Bob was scared as he felt the impact of the heavy body is to put it mildly and there is no doubt but that the Mexican was fully as frightened. Over and over they rolled now one on top and then another. As if by mutual consent the two humans forgot their animosity toward each other and were straining themselves to the utmost to keep those needle like claws from ripping their flesh. In a moment Bob had secured a firm hold on the beast's throat and was trying his best to choke it while the Mexican was using all his strength in an effort to get away. But the beast had secured a firm hold of the man's coat with the claws of one front paw and he could not shake it loose.

In the meantime Slats had drawn his automatic and was hovering over them watching for a chance to shoot without running the risk of hitting one or the other of the men. He jumped from one side to the other thinking he saw his chance if only he were on the other side but, as soon as he reached the other

position, the chance would be gone and he would jump back. Several times Bob felt the sting of the sharp claws as they tore through his clothes, but he continued to cling with a death like grip to the hairy throat. But his strength was fast giving out and he feared that he would have to let go when a shot close to his ear nearly deafened him. Instantly he felt the beast go limp and, with a sigh of relief he let go his hold and, at the same time, was dragged to his feet by a strong pair of arms.

"What is it?" he grasped, as he looked at the still form of the beast.

"It's a puma and the biggest one I ever saw," Slats told him. "But are yer hurt?" he asked anxiously.

"Reckon my legs are a bit scratched up, but I guess that's about all," Bob assured him.

While they were talking the other member of the trio sat on the ground a few feet away ruefully rubbing one of his legs and they could see that his hand was covered with blood.

"Hurt much?" Slats asked not unkindly as he stepped over toward the man.

"Um," he nodded his head.

"Let's see it."

Slats drew away the man's hand and saw that the trowser leg was split from the knee down and that the leg was deeply scratched for a distance of some

four inches. The cut was bleeding profusely and, taking a huge bandana handkerchief from his pocket, he bound it tightly about the leg.

"That'll stop the blood in a minute," he assured him.

The man said nothing but nodded his head as though he understood and was grateful.

"But I thought pumas wouldn't attack a man let alone two," Bob said as soon as Slats had finished his task.

"They won't as a rule but look here. See the mark there? That last shot we heard struck it there and made it mad an' they'll fight when they get their dander up, you bet."

"You bet I'll bet they will," Bob grinned.

"He's a beauty all right an' not an inch lessen nine feet from the tip of his nose ter the tip of his tail, an' they don't grow no bigger nor that."

"I should hope they didn't."

"That's big enough, eh?"

"I'll say it is."

"Now let's see what this feller's got to say fer himself," Slats whispered as he again approached the man who was still sitting in the same place.

"Where's the other Greaser?" he demanded.

"No hablo Ingles," the man shook his head.

"Don't speak English, eh?"

"No hablo Ingles," again the man shook his head.

"He says as how he can't talk man's lingo," Slats said turning to Bob. "He's probably lying as most of them fellers can talk it more or less, but I reckon we can't prove it. You understand English?" he asked, turning back to the man.

But he again shook his head. "No hablo Ingles," he repeated.

"An' I can't talk his lingo neither," Slats said.

"Nor I," Bob added.

For some time Slats tried by various means to make the man understand what they wanted to know but, although he really had little doubt but what he was understood all right enough, the man continued to shake his head and repeat the same words. Finally he gave it up and, motioning Bob to one side, whispered:

"I reckon the only thing ter do is ter let him go and try ter follow him without him knowin' it."

Bob agreed with him and he went slowly back to where the man still sat and, taking him by the arm, pulled him to his feet. He was able to stand and did not seem to have any great difficulty in walking when Slats pulled him along.

"He'll do," Slats said turning to Bob a moment later.

With a wave of the hand to indicate good bye they turned their backs to the Mexican and strode away through the woods.

"He may follow us," Bob suggested as soon as they were a few yards away.

"Jest what I was thinkin'. 'Spect we'd better pull up here by this tree and see'f he comes along."

But, although they waited for several minutes the man did not appear and they finally agreed that he did not intend to follow them.

"I reckon he knew that we'd expect jest what we did suspect an' be on the lookout fer him an' didn't dare risk it."

"Then I guess it's up to us to follow him, eh?"

"You said it, but we've got ter be mighty careful as it were. If I didn't miss my guess more'n a mile he'll 'spect us ter do jest the thing that we're goin' ter do an' that's goin' ter make it mighty hard ter get away with it."

"But we got to do it just the same."

"Shore, we have."

"Then let's get going."

"Not too fast now," Slats counciled. "Give him time ter get a start if he's on his way or ter get discouraged in case he's waitin' fer us ter show up same's we been waitin' fer him."

Bob quickly saw the force of Slats's argument and offered no farther objection to his plan to wait awhile before taking up the trail.

CHAPTER VIII.

SCOUTING.

It was all of a half hour before he told Bob that "he reckoned it was time ter get a move on themselves." Bob had been on pins and needles as he put it and it was with great difficulty that he restrained his desire to start long before. But his better judgment told him that Slats was undoubtedly right and that he would do well to heed his advise. So he sat there, looking at his watch every minute or two, with what patience he could muster, until the word was given.

"Now the fust thing ter find out is if he's gone or is waitin'," Slats declared.

Very cautiously they retraced their steps keeping their eyes and ears wide open, as Slats put it, to catch the slightest indication of the presence of the Mexican. They were careful to expose themselves no more that was necessary, knowing that it was not at all unlikely that he might take a shot at them in case he saw that they were following him. So, as they approached the spot where they had left him,

Slats ordered Bob to stay behind while he reconnoitered a bit. Creeping forward silently he peeped out from behind the same bush through which the Mexican had pushed himself a short time before. He could see no one and, after a moment's pause, he stepped boldly out into the opening. It would not have greatly surprised him had a shot followed his move, but there was none and, after a hasty search of the immediate vicinity, he whistled for Bob to come on.

"I reckon he's gone all right," he said as soon as Bob had joined him.

"Looks that way," Bob agreed. "And the next thing is to pick up his trail."

"Which same I've done."

"Where is it?" Bob demanded.

"Right here," and Slats pointed to the ground a little in front of where Bob was standing.

"He's gone south?"

"Wal, he's started that way."

"All right. Let's make it snappy. Come on."

"Right, but, remember, we got ter be careful. That guy's no fool an' he 'spect us ter follow him."

The man's trail was not hard to follow and it seemed that he had made no effort to conceal it. A broken twig here, a foot print there where a bit of damp ground had retained the outline of his heavy boot, and an occasional sploch of blood were much

more than they needed to enable them to keep on the trail.

"That leg's bleedin' right lively," Slats declared as he pointed to a large red spot on the ground about a half mile from where they had started.

"Yep, it seems to be getting worse," Bob added as he bent over to examine the spot more closely.

"Which same makes it all the easier fer us ter follow."

"That sounds rather heartless, but I know you don't mean it that way."

"Maybe, I don't an' agin maybe I do. I don't aim ter waste much sympathy on that Greaser cause he ain't deservin' of none 'cordin' ter my way of thinkin'."

They had been pressing on as rapidly as they dared and now, suddenly the trail came to an end. Slats, who was a few feet ahead stopped and looked closely about him searching the ground for a clue. Then, when he saw that there was none he hastily drew the boy back into the shelter of a thick clump of bushes.

"Thar's sumpin' queer about it," he whispered.

"What do you mean, queer?"

"That trail endin' all of a sudden so. I think as how he's caught on ter us followin' him an' is up ter sumpin'."

"But where could he have gone?"

"Up a tree most likely."

"You mean it?"

"Shore, I do. Whar else could he have gone?"

"But if he's laying for us why didn't he shoot while he had the chance there?"

"That's why I say it's queer. Why didn't he?"

"Perhaps he'd fired his last cartridge," Bob suggested.

"Yer may be right at that," Slats conceded slowly. "Yep, I believe as how yer are right," he added a moment later.

"It's a good guess anyhow."

"Shore is. Now yer stay right here an' I'll squirm round a bit an' see'f I can get a line on him."

"But remember, we're only guessing about that being his last shot. He may have plenty of them left."

"Don't I know it? I don't intend as how he's goin' ter get a sight of me."

Bob watched him disappear with a feeling of dread in his heart. He knew that Slats was well able to take care of himself under all ordinary circumstances, but these were decidedly out of the ordinary and as the minutes passed and he did not return the dread grew until it seemed he would go insane. "Why don't he come back?" he asked himself over and over again. At last he felt that he could stand the suspense no longer and was about

to start in search of him when the thought that they might get separated struck him and he settled back with a sigh determined to wait a little longer.

Ten minutes passed and then ten more and he felt that he must do something or go mad. Struck with a sudden thought he pursed his lips and sent the call of the evening thrush through the woods. Almost at once the call came back to him, but so faint that he barely caught it. Was it really an answer or only an echo? He wasn't sure and in order to find out he repeated the call this time adding five short notes to the first long drawn out one. He knew that the thrush seldom gave more than four short notes, but if it had been the echo his five notes would be repeated. The reply came a trifle later than before and there were but four short notes.

"That settles that. It was no echo," he said half aloud. Then after a moment he added: "But it couldn't have been Slats. Slats couldn't imitate a thrush like that if his life depended on it. It must have been Jack, but—" Then he paused as a new thought struck him. Could it have been the girl? He could easily imagine her imitating the song of any bird and it was more than likely that she would know that it was no bird who had made that call although he was quite sure it was good enough to fool most anyone. "She'd know those five notes weren't real," he muttered.

He tried it again and again the answer came back to him. It came from the east and, hesitating no longer, he struck off walking as rapidly as he could. After he had gone a few hundred feet he paused and gave the call again. The answer came back promptly but, to his surprise, it seemed no nearer than before he had started. Again he called and the reply convinced him that he was going in the right direction. So he hurried on hoping almost against hope that it was Jack who had answered his signal. From time to time he stopped long enough to send out the call and each time it was ansewered, but he did not seem to be getting any nearer to whoever was repeating the signal. Each time it was so faint that he had to strain his ears to catch the notes. It seemed to the boy that he was chasing a will-o-the-wisp or the elusive bag of gold which is supposed to hang at the end of the rainbow. What could it mean? Was it all his imagination?

Finally, breathing heavily from the undue exertion, he threw himself down at the foot of a tall pine discouraged and disheartened. He was sure he had come all two miles and the last answer to his call, only a few moments before, had seemed as far away as ever. And he knew he was lost, lost in that vast wilderness. Not that he feared for himself. He knew that given time enough, he could find his way out, but how was he going to find Jack? That

was the question which burned its way into his brain. Perhaps, even now, it was too late and he buried his face in his hands while the hot tears coursed down his cheeks.

How long he sat there he could not have told, but suddenly he heard a humming sound over his head and immediately after a thud as something struck the tree. He glanced quickly up and behind and, to his amazement, saw sticking in the trunk and about six feet from the ground a long slim arrow.

"What in the—" he began half aloud, and then cut himself off short as his eye caught sight of a bit of paper coiled around the shaft of the arrow and fastened with a piece of string.

A quick jerk brought the head of the arrow, which he noticed was a wire nail about an inch long, from the trunk of the tree and in another moment he had the paper unrolled. It was only a scrap of rough wrapping paper and the writing on it had evidently been done with a pencil none too sharp, but there was something undefinable about it which spoke of a being educated and refined. It was faintly written but still easily decipherable.

> Go straight toward the sun until you come to a stream. Follow it up for a half mile until you come to a large tree broken off about half way up. About a hundred feet to the right of that

point is a cave and in that cave you will find your brother.

The letter was neither addressed or signed, but he had no doubt as to the identity of the writer or for whom it was intended. He glanced up and saw that the sun was just about half way down the western sky and knew that he would have no difficulty in obeying directions for the present at least. Gone was every trace of fatigue and no thought save that of getting to his brother in the shortest possible space of time came into his mind as he started off at a brisk run. He reached the stream sooner that he had expected, within five minutes as a matter of fact, and without so much as a glance about, he turned up stream.

The growth was much more dense near the stream and he was forced much against his will, to cut down his speed as he was afraid to lose sight of the brook for more that a minute at a time fearing that he might miss the way and lose precious minutes.

"At the rate I'm going it ought to take me about fifteen to twenty minutes to make a half mile," he told himself as he glanced at his watch. "I'll go till five minutes to four and then I'll begin to look for that tree. Won't do to miss it."

But as he went the way grew more open and he made better time, so when his watch told him that

it was ten minutes to four he began to look in earnest for the tree. He also proceeded with greater caution for, although the note had said nothing regarding the Mexicans, he did not for a minute doubt that Jack was their prisoner, and for him to be caught would, he felt, be the last straw.

"It seems kind of funny that she didn't say anything about them or even caution me to be on my guard," he mused as he crept steadily forward. "But probably she thought I'd have sense enough to do that without being warned," he thought.

But, either the writer of the note had a poor idea of distance or Bob had miscalculated his speed, for it was nearly half past the hour before he caught sight of the broken tree standing about fifty feet from the edge of the stream. It was fortunate for him that he saw the tree when he did for he had about concluded that he must have missed it and was on the point of turning back.

The tree once sighted he lost no time in turning to the right and plunging into the thick growth which, at this place, was very thick indeed. So close together did the giant trees grow here that, although the sun was still far from the horizon, it was as if twilight had already fallen. Fast travel was impossible, but that he did not mind as he knew he must advance with extreme caution feeling sure that one or both of the Mexicans were not far away.

"Wish she'd been a bit more explicit about that cave," he thought as he stopped to listen.

He had gone all of a hundred feet from the tree, but as yet had seen no sign of a cave and was beginning to wonder how much trouble he was going to have in locating it when, without a sound of warning, a rope settled over his head and, before he could offer resistance, the loop was drawn taut pinning his arms to his sides and he was jerked from his feet.

"Now the beans are all spilled," was the thought which flashed through his mind as he fell.

"Good work, Jose," he heard someone say, and almost immediately a man was on him wrapping the rope about his body until he was securely trussed.

He made no resistance, knowing that it would be useless for the rope had, from the first, held his arms closely bound to his sides and he had been unable to free them. The man who had bound him was the larger of the two Mexicans and was truly a villainous looking fellow seen now for the first time in daylight. That it was the man who had entered their room in the hotel and had stolen the map he had little doubt.

"Tie him up good and tight," he heard the other say but, as he lay he was unable to see him.

"It's one good job," the man called Jose replied, as he got up to his feet.

"What'll we do with him?" the other asked.

"Dump him in the cave along with the other."

"That's good. Come on."

As the other man now came into his line of vision Bob had no trouble in recognizing him as the man who had been his ally in the fight with the puma.

"Slats was right about him understanding English," he thought as the larger man took him by the shoulders while the other seized his feet.

All this time Bob had not spoken and he continued to keep his mouth closed as they carried him through a dense growth of bushes and into an opening between two large rocks. Almost immediately it was so dark that he could not see a thing but the men seemed to know their way for they did not hesitate until they had gone, he judged about fifty feet from the entrance. Then, without a word, they dropped him to the ground and left him. Fortunately the ground was soft or he might have been injured by the fall short as the distance was, and even so the breath was knocked from his body and, for a moment, he lay gasping.

"They're brutes," he thought as the breath came slowly back to his lungs.

A moment later he heard a slight movement only a short distance to his right and he was about to speak when his brother's voice came to him in a low whisper.

"Who is it?"

"Jack!"

"Bob!"

The first exclamation was one of joy, but the other was filled with a note of despair.

"So they got you too," Jack whispered after the first moment of surprise had passed.

"Looks very much like it. Are you tied?"

"I'll say I am. How about you?"

"Same thing."

"Kind of looks as though the jig's up, doesn't it?"

"I've seen more cheerful situations for a fact, but 'while there's hope,' you know."

"Where's Slats?"

"I don't know."

"How's that?"

Bob proceeded to give a full account of what had happened and as soon as he had finished asked:

"How'd you get into this fix? How'd they get hold of you? The last I knew you were sound asleep in the tent and then you'd vanished."

"Well, it's not a very long story. I woke up in the night so thirsty that I simply had to have a drink. So I sneaked out as careful as I could so as not to wake you up and went down to the brook. I was bending over for the drink when the big fellow jumped me. Honest, I didn't have a chance in the

world. He had my hands tied behind my back so quick that it was done before I knew it. Then he told me that if I made a noise he'd kill me, and I was afraid he'd do it. I don't know why I didn't yell the first thing, but I reckon I was too much surprised. Anyhow I didn't and then it was too late. He marched me away with a gun poking in my back and threatening to shoot if I made a sound, so I kept still."

"Naturally."

"Well, we got here a little before daylight and found the other fellow waiting for us. They didn't talk much, but tied me up and dumped me in here and here I've been ever since. That's all I know about it. I hadn't seen or heard a thing of them since till they brought you in. What do you make of it?"

"Nothing as yet."

"Nor I, except that they want to get us out of their way."

"That's probably it."

"And now I reckon it's up to Slats."

"And he's a good one for it to be up to."

"Unless they get him and bring him in too," Jack declared mournfully.

For a few moments they were silent and then Jack said:

"I say, Bob, I don't quite get the idea of that note hitched to that arrow."

"What do you mean?" Bob asked anxiously.

"Well, I don't know's I know just what I do mean, but that note got you into their power, didn't it?"

"In a way I suppose it did. Are you inferring that it was written with that intention?"

"Well, it kind of looks that way to me."

"I don't believe it."

"And I don't know's I do either, but I can't help being suspicious. Why didn't she warn you to be careful? That is if that girl wrote it."

"I thought of that and don't know the answer. Probably she took it for granted that I'd know enough to look out."

"Well, whether it was a trap or not, it worked like one," Jack sighed.

"There's no doubt about that," Bob agreed.

Again there was silence for some time then Bob spoke again.

"Has it struck you that there's something funny about those fellows?"

"What do you mean, funny?"

"I mean that they don't talk like Greasers."

"Jimminy crickets, but that's so. I hadn't thought of it before, but they speak English as well as a white man."

"I couldn't detect a bit of accent when they spoke before bringing me in here."

"You think they're not Mexicans?"

"Not necessarily. They've got the looks all right and I reckon they're Greasers all right, but they're not common ignorant Greasers, that's certain. They've lived a good part of their lives in the States. It takes a long time to get an accent out of your speech."

"But I'll bet they're a bad pair just the same."

"I guess there's little doubt about that," Bob agreed slowly. Then, after a short pause, he asked: "How are you tied? Pretty tight?"

"I'll say I am. How about you?"

"Same here, but I think I can get loose if I have time enough. You know I can get out of most anything in the way of a knot."

"Then you'd better get busy if you think there's a chance. No knowing when they'll come back."

All the time the two boys had been whispering Bob had been straining at his bonds and he fancied that he had succeeded in loosening very slightly the rope about his wrists. But his captor had done a most thorough job and he knew that it was going to take time even though he succeeded in the end. But at the end of half an hour of work which made his wrists feel as though all the skin had been rubbed off them, he was forced to acknowledge to himself

that he had been altogether too sanguine. The rope, in spite of his most strenuous efforts, would not yield another hair.

"Making any headway?" Jack whispered.

"Not much, I'm afraid."

"That's bad. Suppose you see if you can roll over here and let me try my teeth on it."

Bob did not have much trouble in rolling to his brother's side, but he might as well have stayed where he was for, strong as were Jack's teeth, they could make no headway on the rope and his own were equally useless when tried on those which bound Jack.

"It's no use," he finally panted. "I know when I'm licked all right. We simply can't get loose without help and that's all there is to it."

"And there's no one to help, but Slats," Jack groaned.

"There's that girl," Bob reminded him.

"But I've kind of lost faith in her."

"I haven't."

"Well, I hope your faith is justified. Where do you suppose those fellows have gone?"

"After Slats, I imagine," Bob replied gloomily.

"Well, here's hoping they don't get him."

They had no way of measuring the time, but Bob thought they must have been in the cave all of two hours when they heard someone approaching and

the light from an electric flash played about the room. It was in the hands of the larger of the two men and, as soon as he located them, he stepped close up and asked:

"Where's that other fellow?"

"I don't know," Bob replied.

"No lying now," he snapped. "I know you know and you've got to tell or—"

"I'm not lying," Bob interrupted. "I don't know where he is and that's the truth."

"When did you see him last?"

"About noon today."

"Where?"

"I don't know where we were when he left me, but it was about two miles from here."

"What did he leave you for?"

"Well, I hardly know how to answer that question," Bob began slowly.

"You'd better learn how mighty quick," the man snapped.

"All right. You see, we were, of course trying to find my brother and he told me to wait while he did a bit of scouting."

"And you waited?"

"Yes, but he didn't come back."

"How'd you find your way here?"

"Oh, I got tired of waiting and decided to do some scouting on my own hook," Bob replied easily.

"You're not much of a scout," the man sneered.

"So it would seem," Bob agreed. "But may I ask what you're going to do with us?"

"Sure, you may."

"Thanks, I do."

"Do what?"

"Why, ask what you're going to do with us."

"And that's all the good it's going to do you."

"You won't tell?"

"Exactly."

"Well, I hardly thought you would," Bob sighed.

"Now look here, you, I believe you're lying and if you are you'd better reconsider."

"I can't tell you what I don't know."

"But you can and will tell me what you do know. Now I'll be back in about half an hour and then you'd better come across or—"

He left the threat unfinished and, turning on his heel, left the cave without another word.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MYSTERY AGAIN.

"CHEERFUL prospect, isn't it?" Bob whispred as soon as the Mexican had gone.

"What'll he do when he comes back?" Jack asked, his voice trembling the least bit in spite of himself.

"I reckon we'll have to wait and see unless someone comes to our rescue."

"Same's they always do in books," Jack whispered.

"And it's about time."

"That half hour must be about up, isn't it?" Jack asked some time later.

"I don't know how long it's been," Bob answered.

Ever since the Mexican had left he had been trying to think of something to say which would cheer his brother, but so far no thought had come to him to which he could give utterance and he did not believe in holding out hopes which he knew to be false. That they were in a tight situation he acknowledged to himself and he realized that unless they succeeded in getting away before the man returned something unpleasant, to say the least, was

sure to happen. He knew he could not make the Mexican believe that he was telling the truth regarding his ignorance of Slats's whereabouts and visions of different modes of torture to make a prisoner tell his secrets made the blood in his veins run cold. Where was Slats? He had asked himself the question many times since he had been captured and now, for some reason, the answer seemed farther away than ever. If only he could get a hand free, but he had long since realized that it was impossible. The man who had fastened those ropes certainly knew his business and the trying only caused him pain and accomplished nothing.

Then his thoughts turned to the mysterious girl. Who could she be? Was she, as Jack had hinted, in league with their enemies? He could not believe it. Why had she warned them of the nearness of the Mexicans if she was on their side? No, he could not accept that theory. It was not her fault that he had fallen into their power. Although he had no proof of it he was sure, in his own mind, that she was innocent.

For some minutes neither of the boys had spoken and Bob was quite sure that the half hour must be nearly up. He was about to whisper to Jack when a slight sound from the entrance of the cave caught his keen ear. Someone was creeping stealthily toward them and he reasoned that it could not be one

of the Mexicans, else he would have come in boldly. He waited, his heart beating wildly, and in a moment he knew that the person was close at hand. Was it a friend or an enemy? Then a low whisper settled the question.

"Where are you?"

"Right here," Bob whispered, and immediately groping hands touched his face.

"You are tied?"

"Yes, behind my back."

"Just a minute. Now roll over."

Bob obeyed and in another minute his hands were free.

"Here," the voice whispered and a small pocket knife was thrust into his hand.

"Who are you?" Bob whispered as he slashed at the rope about his feet.

There was no reply and he repeated the question a little louder, but still there was no answer. She must have departed, he thought, and without a sound. But now was no time to think about it. He knew that the Mexicans might return at any moment and he lost no time in freeing Jack.

"It was she?" Jack whispered as Bob cut the rope from his wrists.

"Yes, but come, we must hurry. Those fellows will be here any minute now."

Even as he spoke the sound of voices was heard just outside the cave.

"It's too late," Jack moaned.

"But we're free," Bob reminded him.

"And we can fight," Jack added.

"We'll take them by surprise and that'll give us a big advantage."

It was evident that, for some reason, the two men were in no hurry to enter the cave and their delay gave the boys time to lay their plans.

"We'd better lie down and make believe we're still tied," Jack suggested. "They'll flash their torch in ahead of them and will know that we've got loose."

"Right."

So they stretched themselves again on the floor of the cave and quickly arranged the ropes so that only a careful examination would reveal the deception. They had barely time to fix things to their satisfaction when they heard the men coming in and in another minute the rays from the flashlight were playing on them.

"Well, have you decided to come through?" the larger of the men asked.

"I told you all I know before," Bob replied quietly.

"Stubborn, eh?"

"No, only ignorant."

"Well, we'll soon see if we can't refresh your

memory. Do you know how it feels to have the bottoms of your feet burnt?"

"Not from experience, but I reckon I can imagine it."

"But I know from experience and let me assure you that it's far from pleasant."

"So I imagine."

"Then let me advise you to avoid the experience."

"I would if I could, but I can't tell you what I don't know," Bob said purposely allowing his voice to tremble.

"Heat is a wonderful persuader, let me tell you."

"But not a teacher."

"Well, as to that, we'll see." Then turning to his companion, he said: "See if those irons are hot and if they are cherry red bring them in."

The man left the cave and was back in a minute and in each hand he bore a glowing branding iron.

"Just a minute till I get his shoes off," the other said as he knelt down at Bob's feet.

Bob did not wait for the man to touch his shoes but, as soon as he was on his knees, he gave a loud shout and, before the Mexican had time to recover from his surprise, he had him by the throat. But, quick as he was, Jack was just as speedy and had the smaller man on the ground at the same time. Bob immediately learned that his antagonist was a man of great strength and realized that he would get the

worst of it unless his knowledge of wrestling gave him a big advantage. The man quickly succeeded in freeing his throat from his grasp and, throwing his arms about the boy's body, rolled him over until he was on top. The flashlight had fallen from the man's hand at the first attack and was now lying on the ground a few feet away the lens pointing from them. But the light was still on and made it possible for them to see dimly.

By its light Bob saw that the man had raised his arm and was about to dash his fist in his face and, by a quick movement he dodged the blow and the fist struck the ground. The force of the blow threw the man slightly off his balance and gave Bob the chance he was looking for, and before the man could recover he had secured a half-nelson and, exerting all his strength, threw him completely over his head. The Mexican landed with a heavy thud and Bob sprang to his feet, in time to face him as he arose and rushed. The Mexican, thoroughly maddened by the fall and with his wind weakened, left himself wide open as he leaped forward and, with careful aim, Bob struck for the point of his chin, putting all the force of his hundred and eighty pounds behind the blow.

Bob's aim was perfect and the man's head snapped back and for an instant he wavered, trying to maintain his balance. Then he toppled over backward and lay still. It was a clean knockout and Bob

breathed a quick prayer of thanks as he turned to see how Jack was faring. But the younger boy needed no help. The smaller of the two men, weakened by the loss of considerable blood from the attack of the puma a few hours before, was no match for the active boy and, just as Bob turned, he was in the act of delivering a blow similar to the one that had put the larger man to sleep.

"Two strikes and out," Bob shouted.

"And two out all out," Jack laughed.

"Let's get 'em tied up before they come to," Bob suggested as he looked about for the bits of rope.

The job was quickly accomplished and the boys were masters of the situation.

"Things sure look a bit brighter," Jack declared as he pulled the last knot tight.

"You said a mouthful," Bob agreed.

"Shall we beat it now?"

"Better wait till they wake up. I'm kinder curious to know what they'll have to say. But let's frisk 'em first."

They found an automatic in a pocket of each of them and these they appropriated, just as Bob's victim gave a low moan.

"He's coming around," Bob declared and, a moment later the man opened his eyes.

Bob flashed the light full in his face and if looks could kill, the boy would have dropped in his tracks.

"Might as well take it easy," he said.

"If ever I—" the man began but Bob interrupted him.

"I know just how you feel. In fact, I reckon I felt just the same way a bit ago."

"Let's see if they've got that map," Jack broke in.

"Good idea," Bob agreed.

But, although they searched both men thoroughly, they failed to find it. While being searched the smaller man opened his eyes, but said nothing.

"If those irons are still hot we might be able to persuade him to tell us what he's done with it," Bob suggested.

"Good idea," Jack agreed and a moment later announced that they were still good and hot. "Beats all how they hold the heat," he chuckled.

While Jack was speaking Bob held the light on the big man's face and saw the sweat break out on his forehead.

"You know it's not pleasant, eh? Well you needn't be scared. We're not brutes," he told him.

A look of great relief sprang to the man's face and he muttered something about having been bluffing himself.

"Tell that to the marines," Jack snapped as he turned toward the entrance followed by Bob.

"I suppose we'll have to come back and let them go after we find Slats," Bob said.

"I suppose so, but how about finding him? Any idea where to look?"

"Not much, but I think we'd better get back to the camp first thing and see if he's there or has been there."

"Can you find it? I'm so turned around that I'm sure I don't have an idea in which direction it is."

"It's that way," Bob replied pointing.

"Well, you can't prove it by me, but I'd say it was in the opposite direction."

"And I'm sure you're wrong."

"Well, seeing that I'm not at all sure I'm right we'll take your bet. How far away do you think it is?"

"Not more'n two miles, I should say."

"Then we ought to hit it before dark. Come on, let's beat it."

They at once struck off through the thick woods in the direction Bob had indicated. The sun was low in the sky and they knew that dusk would begin to gather before long, so they hurried as rapidly as possible, knowing that unless they found the camp before dark they would have to spend the night in the woods.

"Do you suppose anything could have happened to him?" Jack asked as they went along.

"I don't see how it could have," Bob replied. "Those two Mexicans are the only enemies we have

hereabouts so far as I know and they didn't know anything about where he is."

"Unless they were bluffing."

"But what could have been their object in bluffing about that?"

"Search me. I only suggested it."

"What do you think about not finding that map on one of them?" Bob asked a few minutes later.

"Looks as though they might have lost it, don't you think?"

"That's just the way it looks to me. And, do you know, I don't believe they've discovered that pile of stones yet."

"Then you think it was the girl's face we saw?"

"I sure do."

"But, if they've lost their map why didn't they search us for our copy and take it away from us?"

"That's a good point. Why didn't they?"

"I asked you first."

"And I wish I could tell you, but I can't. Maybe they thought they had plenty of time and would do it later."

"Maybe," Jack replied, but his tone told Bob that he did not take much stock in the suggestion.

For some time they pushed on and finally Jack asked:

"Haven't we come two miles yet?"

"Seems to me we have. It's been most an hour

since we started, but I haven't seen anything of the cave yet," Bob panted.

"Think we're lost?"

"Can't say."

"Well, I'm beginning to get suspicious."

"To tell the truth I've been in that condition for the last fifteen minutes," Bob acknowledged.

"And to tell the truth I haven't seen a thing that looked familiar since we started."

"Well, it's too late to try in another direction now," Bob declared. "It'll be dark in another hour."

"Then I reckon we might as well keep on for a while. Maybe we haven't gone far enough after all."

"Perhaps—" Bob started to speak and then stopped as the sound of two shots fired close together came to their ears.

"There he is now," Jack cried as he pulled out his revolver and fired two shots in the air.

Another two shots answered immediately and the boys were sure it was Slats.

"We'd better wait right here and let him find us," Bob said after he had answered the signal again.

They threw themselves on the ground and in a little more than ten minutes Slats came into view.

"For the love of Mike, did the train run over you more'n once?" Jack gasped as he saw the cowboy.

It was little wonder that he asked the question for

Slats looked as though something nearly as serious had happened to him. His clothes were torn and covered with dirt and his face was streaked with blood.

"I shore don't wonder yer ask," he grinned.

"But what happened?" Bob inquired anxiously.

"Fell inter a hole."

"Must have been a big one," Jack declared.

"About twelve feet deep an' six or eight across."

"Do you know how far we are from camp?" Bob asked.

"Shore, about a hundred yards."

"Is that all?" There was a note of disgust as well as relief in Jack's voice.

"That's all. Was yer lost?"

"That's about the size of it," Bob acknowledged.

"Wal, let's get back ter—but where d'yer find Jack?"

"It's a pretty long story," Bob replied. "As you were about to say, let's get back to camp and get something to eat then we'll exchange stories."

"Yer said it, come on."

Slats led the way and in less than ten minutes they were back at the pyramid. Jack took the burros down to the brook while the others set to work getting supper and it was nearly ready when he returned. The meal was a hasty one as all were anxious to hear the other's story.

"Now shoot," Slats ordered as soon as the dishes were cleared away, and Bob related what had happened since he had left him.

Slats listened without comment until he had finished and then gave it as his opinion that they had had a pretty narrow squeak.

"That girl was shore Johnnie-on-the-spot all right," he declared.

"Now you shoot," Jack suggested.

"Wal, after I left yer I sneaked along fer awhile without seein' nothin' an' I reckon I must got a quarter of a mile away when I tumbled inter the hole."

"Didn't you see it?" Jack interrupted.

"After I fell in, I did. Yer see jest afore I come ter it I thought I heard a noise behind me an' turned ter watch an' walked backward a bit an' the fust thing I didn't know nothin'. Yer see I must have pitched in head fust so ter speak an' my head must a hit a stone 'cause when I come ter' 'twas bleedin' right smart like and felt some sore."

"And I never thought to see to it," Bob said.

"That's all right. 'Twasn't much of a cut after all, only a scratch so ter speak, an' I give it a good wash in a little stream I come across. But I guess I forgot ter wash my face," he grinned.

"How long were you unconscious?" Bob asked.

"I don't know, but I reckon 'twasn't more'n a few minutes."

"And what did you do then?" Bob asked.

"Tried ter get out."

"And you couldn't?"

"Not fer a long time I couldn't. Yer see the sides of the hole were right straight up an' down an' there wasn't a thing ter catch hold on."

"Why didn't you yell?" Jack asked.

"Yell? I did yell. Putty near yelled my head off but yer see a sound don't carry fur when it comes from the bottom of a hole as deep as that one."

"But how did you get out at last?" Bob asked.

"I had ter cut steps in the side of the hole an' climb up that way, an' I'll bet I slid back more'n a dozen times afore I made it. It shore was some job. Yer see the side was kinder soft an' crumbly like an' jest as I'd be thinkin' I was gettin' along fine an' was agoin' ter make her back I'd go kerplunk."

"What was so deep a hole dug there for do you suppose?" Jack asked.

"Yer can search me." Slats shook his head.

"Perhaps it was an old bear trap," Bob suggested.

"Too wide fer that," Slats declared.

"But it might have been for an extra big bear," Jack grinned.

"Wal, that's as good a guess as any other I

reckon so we'll have ter let it go at that," Slats said as he got up and threw another log on the fire.

"How about those Mexes? Going to let 'em stay tied up all night?" Jack asked a few minutes later.

"You bet we're going to," Bob answered him.

"Won't hurt 'em a mite," Slats added. "They'll have a good long time ter think about their sins."

"But we'll have to go to them the first thing in the morning," Bob declared.

"I 'spose so, but 'twould sarve 'em right ter leave 'em there ter rot," Slats affirmed.

They decided that it would not be necessary to keep a watch that night and, as they were all tired out with the day's adventures, they retired early. The night passed without incident and they were up with the sun. It was Sunday and all agreed that they would make no attempt at solving the mystery of the pyramid until the following day. All were in good spirits and, after a good breakfast, they started for the cave. They were in no hurry knowing that their captives were in no danger of starving and, at the most, were suffering only from cramped limbs. So it was nearly nine o'clock when they reached the broken tree.

"Wait a minute," Bob said as he stopped and held up a hand. "Do you hear anything?"

"Not a sound," Jack said. "Reckon they're still asleep."

"Well, let's be careful," Bob suggested.

"What for?" Jack asked.

"Well, you know, it's better to be careful than sorry."

"But they're tied up."

"And so were we but we got free and it's not impossible that they have done the same."

"Bob's right," Slats advised. "Never trust a Greaser further nor yer can see him. That's my motto an' it's a good one let me tell yer."

So they advanced cautiously stopping every few minutes to listen. But no sound save those habitual to the forest disturbed them and soon they stood in front of the cave.

"Hello, in the cave," Bob shouted.

"Looks suspicious," Jack whispered after they had waited a moment and no answer had come to their hail.

"Hello, in there," Bob shouted again.

Again there was no answer.

"Seems kind of spooky," Jack whispered.

"Spooks yer eye," Slats grunted. "I'll bet they've gone."

"But they couldn't have got free by themselves," Bob insisted.

"Perhaps that gal helped them too," Slats suggested.

"It's possible, but I don't believe it," Bob declared as he started forward to enter the cave.

"Hold on thar." Slats caught him by the arm and pulled him back. "I'm goin' in fust."

"I don't see why you should take all the chances," Bob complained as he tried to pull away.

"Ain't I the oldest?"

"I suppose so but—"

"Thar's no buts about it," and before they could object further, Slats darted into the entrance.

But the boys were close at his heels and were in the chamber, where they had left the two men, almost as soon as he.

"Didn't I tell yer they had skipped?" Slats snapped as he threw the rays of his torch about the cave.

The two men were gone sure enough and not even a bit of the rope remained to give them an idea as to how they had escaped.

"What do you know about that?" Jack gasped as he looked about the room.

"They must have had help," Bob insisted.

"Maybe," Slats was plainly skeptical and even Jack shook his head.

"Well, let's see what the place looks like while we're here," Bob suggested.

The others were agreeable and for nearly a half hour they searched the cave which they found to consist of the single room which was some forty

feet long and about half as wide while the roof varied from six to ten feet high. But there was absolutely nothing in the place except a few rocks and finally they went outside to look for marks which might tell them which way the men had gone. But here again they drew a blank. To be sure there were plenty of heel prints just outside the entrance, in fact there were, as Jack declared, althogether too many and they could make nothing out of them. Finally they decided that they might as well go back to camp and, disappointed and mystified, they slowly retraced their steps.

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER MYSTERY.

THE remainder of the day they rested and, as soon as it was dark, went to bed all but Slats who was to stand the first watch.

"We were mighty foolish that we didn't have a guard on last night," Slats told them. "Thar's no knowin' when them scamps got loose an' they might have captured the whole shebang lock, stock an' barrel. But yer can bet your boots we won't do it agin."

Bob relieved him at eleven o'clock and was in turn relieved by Jack at three. Nothing occurred to disturb them and by seven the next morning breakfast was cleared away and they were ready to tackle the job of solving the mystery of the pyramid, provided, as Jack said, there was any mystery to it.

"Seems to me that the first thing to do is to see if we can find a secret entrance," Bob said as he gazed at the huge pile of stones.

"Seeing as how we're stumped if we don't I reckon your advice is good," Jack chuckled.

"What do you mean, stumped?" Bob demanded.

"Well, you don't expect to dig one of those stones out with your finger nails, do you?"

"Of course not."

"And what else have we got to do it with?"

"We ought to have a drill and some dynamite," Bob mused.

"But 'ought tos' aren't flying around here at this time of year," Jack laughed.

"I reckon as how yer about right, Jack boy," Slats broke in. "But one thing at a time. We'll have a good hunt fer that secret door of Bob's an' if we can't find it, then'll be time enough ter worry about tools."

It took them until dinner time to go over the surface of the four sides of the pyramid, so thoroughly did they search. But nothing came of it and when, at twelve o'clock, Bob suggested that Jack had better make a trip to the brook for a mess of trout while he watered the burros and Slats built a fire, the others were ready to quit for the time being.

"If there is a secret door it's so cunningly hidden that we'll never be able to find it," Bob said as they were clearing away the dinner dishes.

"Do you really think there is one?" Jack asked.

"How do I know?"

"You don't. I asked you if you thought there was."

"Well yes, I do think there is," Bob laughed.

"Why?"

"Just because, I guess."

"That's a woman's reason and no good," Jack retorted.

"I know, but it's all the one I've got so it'll have to do."

"Then I reckon we'd better go into a committee of the whole and consider ways and means," Jack laughed.

"What do you think about it, Slats?" Bob asked.

Slats scratched his head. "Wal, I think yer're right about the door, that is ter say, about us not being able ter find it an' as fer the rest of it, if yer ask me, I'll say as how it's a prutty hard nut ter crack."

"You think it's impossible?"

"With the tools we've got, yes."

"Who would have thought that they'd have blocked up the entrance to a mine with such a pile of stones?" Jack groaned.

"And we're not even sure it is the mine at all," Bob added.

"But what else can it be?"

"Might be a tomb," Slats suggested.

"And maybe old Tut's brother is buried in it," Jack grinned.

"If he is he must have died a long ways from home," Bob laughed.

"Wal, it's the only thing we've found so far that

could be it, an' I'll bet my boots as how it is it," Slats declared.

"So near and yet so far," Jack groaned.

"If we only had a crow bar," Bob said as he walked toward the pyramid.

"Might's well wish for a complete blasting outfit while your about it," Jack called after him.

Bob walked around the corner of the pile and, after a few minutes, Jack followed him. He was half way up the side of the pyramid clinging to the stones with his fingers and toes and seemed to be intently examining one of them.

"Found anything?" Jack called out.

"There's a stone here that's the least bit loose," Bob replied without looking down.

"Can you move it?"

"I'm not quite sure, but I think I did move it the least bit but I can't seem to do it again," Bob replied as he slid down to the ground. "Suppose you get up there and see what you think of it."

"I think you were dreaming," Jack declared a moment later from the position Bob had occupied.

"You can't move it."

"Not a wiggle."

"But you see that crack just under it, don't you."

"Sure, but what of it?"

"Come down here and I'll tell you. Now my idea," he continued as soon as Jack had descended,

"is that if we could make that crack a bit wider we could put a charge of powder in it and it might loosen it so that we could pull it out."

"Fine, but where's the powder coming from. Going to make it?"

"Hardly, but couldn't we get enough out of some cartridges?"

"Do you realize how many it would take? We may need those cartridges before we get home, you know."

Just then Slats joined them and, after pointing out the crack to him, Bob asked his opinion regarding his plan. Slats at once shook his head decidedly.

"No good. 'Twould take every last one we've got ter have enough powder ter move that rock an' I don't believe as how 'twould do it at that an' 'twouldn't be safe ter be here without 'em. No, I wouldn't dast risk it."

"All right, two against one's good enough for me. Someone please suggest something," Bob said as he sat down on the ground and looked up at them with a smile.

"If you're sure you moved it we might take the hatchet or one of the knives and try digging at that crack," Jack suggested.

"Better take a knife," Slats advised. "We'll need the hatchet and I 'spose we can get along without one of the knives. But I don't think as how yer'll ac-

complish much, seein' as how thar's no mortar atween them stones."

"Then you don't—" Bob began, but the other interrupted him.

"Oh, go ahead an' try it. It might amount ter sumpin', yer never can tell."

By this time Jack, who had disappeared as soon as the plan was broached, reappeared with a big hunting knife which he had brought with him.

"If I break this and don't accomplish anything somebody's going to be told how many peas make five," he declared as he began to climb up the side of the mound. "I thought as much," he growled a few minutes later as about half of the blade of the knife fell chattering to the ground. "You can make just as much impression on that rock with a knife as you could on the Rock of Gibraltar with a toothpick."

"How'd you break it?" Bob asked innocently.

"How could I help it trying to pry out a five hundred pound rock with it," Jack snorted in disgust.

"I didn't mean you should try to pry it out."

"What did you mean then?"

"Why, I meant for you to just dig out the crack as it were."

"As it wasn't, you mean," Jack snapped. "That crack is only about an inch deep and there's nothing to dig out of it let me tell you."

"Then there's another idea exploded. What's next?"

"You say."

"How about it, Slats?" Bob asked turning to the man.

"Wal, my honest opinion is that we're up again it good an' proper when it comes ter breakin' inter that rock pile as I told yer before."

"You mean we'd better give it up?"

"Not exactly, but if that's the entrance ter the mine, the which I'm not so sure of, we've got ter have the tools ter get inter it, that's sartin shore."

"Then you think we'd better go back to the town and get some tools an' come again?"

"Sumpin' like that. But why not hunt around a bit and make sure that there isn't another entrance? Maybe it isn't the mine after all."

"What do you say, Jack?" Bob asked turning to his brother.

"I don't like that going back part for a cent, but the other is all right. We haven't really hunted much you know and we may find it somewhere else around here."

"Then I move that we give it the once over once more on the chance that we may strike the secret door. It's now two o'clock. Let's spend the rest of the afternoon at it and if we don't find anything

we'll start out hunting again in the morning. What do you say?"

"I vote yes," Jack said without hesitation and Slats nodded his head.

So for the next four hours they crawled over the surface of the pyramid scanning every inch of its area but, when six o'clock came they knew no more than when they had started.

"I know when I'm licked," Jack declared as he jumped to the ground.

"Well, negative results aren't always wasted," Bob encouraged him as he landed at his side. "We've done a good thorough job and there's some satisfaction in that."

"I wish I knew what those Mexes were up to right now," Jack said, as they were walking slowly back to the tent.

"Yes, it would help some," Bob assured him.

Another night passed without incident. Early in the morning Jack started for the brook after water for the coffee, but he had hardly rounded the corner of the pyramid when the others heard him shout.

"Bob, Slats, make it snappy!"

Bob dropped the hatchet with which he was cutting kindling for the fire and Slats rushed out of the tent and together they dashed for the corner. They found Jack standing with his eyes glued on a spot about half way up the side of the pyramid.

"What do you know about that?" He gasped without moving his eyes.

"Fer the love of Mike," Slats cried.

"Great guns!" Bob ejaculated.

It was little wonder that they were struck with amazement for there where the stone, which Bob thought he had moved the day before, had been, now yawned a hole about three feet long by two wide. For as much as two minutes none spoke after that first ejaculation. The sight took away their power of speech.

"I said it was spooky around here and now I know it," Jack finally declared and this time Slats did not dispute him.

"But—but—" Bob began and then stopped.

"How in the world—" Slats also began and then he too stopped, and for another two minutes there was silence.

"Somebody please pinch me," Jack begged. "Ouch, I didn't mean to pick out a piece of my flesh," he cried as Bob accommodated him. "But I'm awake all right," he added with a grin.

That broke the spell and, with a word of warning not to do anything until he got his flashlight, Bob darted back for the tent. He was back in an instant and, closely followed by Jack, began climbing toward the hole. Gone was all thought of breakfast or anything except the desire to look into that hole. It took

them but an instant to reach the opening and then the secret of the rock was disclosed. It had been swung back inward on a pair of heavy hinges and was now pressed close to the inside of the mound. Neither spoke as Bob threw the light from his flash through the opening and played it about the interior. Then Jack gasped:

"Stung again."

To say that the boys were disappointed does not begin to state their feelings as they gazed about the space inside the pyramid, for it was absolutely empty and there was no sign of any opening into the ground.

"What yer mean, stung?" Slats called up.

"This is no mine," Bob replied.

"There ain't a sign of a thing that looks like it might be a mine," Jack added. "In fact, there's nothing here but space."

"Wal, that too bad," Slats consoled. "Guess yer might's well come down then an' we'll have some breakfast an' then we'll get in thar an' do a bit o' lookin' "

Of course they could talk of but one thing while preparing the meal and eating it. Who had moved the stone and how?

"Maybe it has some kind of time lock arrangement," Jack suggested.

"Don't be foolish," Bob chided. "Who would wind it up if it had a thing of that sort?"

"Oh, of course, I didn't mean it really. But it beats me," Jack declared.

"Same here, but I intend to find out about it sooner or later," Bob said as he reached for the coffee pot.

"One thing I can't understand—" Jack began, but Bob interrupted him.

"Only one?"

"Among many, I was going to add," Jack grinned, "and that is how that stone could have closed so tight."

"Well, I don't think that's so hard. It's only about three inches thick if you noticed it."

"I didn't but I'll take your word for it," Jack said. "And now one other little point. Who opened it?"

"Just that little point will satisfy you, eh?" Bob laughed.

"Just that little one and nothing else."

"Then I reckon you'll have to go unsatisfied for the present," Bob assured him. "If we knew that we'd probably know a lot."

"Either you boys go ter sleep on watch last night?" Slats asked suddenly.

But both were quite certain that they had kept wide awake and assured him of it.

"Then I don't see how anyone could have sneaked in here and did the trick."

"But someone must have just the same," Bob insisted.

"Unless it was spooks," Jack added.

"Spooks my eye. Thar ain't no sech animal as I told yer afore."

"I know it but—"

"It won't do any good to but so much," Bob interrupted. "Let's clean up and then get inside and see what we can find. Seems as though there must be something in there. Men don't go to all the trouble of making a thing like that just for the sake of making it."

"I'll say they don't," Jack agreed, his enthusiasm returning with Bob's hopeful tone.

"Now I'll keep watch on the outside while yer go in an' see what yer can find," Slats proposed a few minutes later as they stood again looking up at the opening.

"You think it would be unsafe for us all to go?" Bob asked.

"I shore do. How do yer know but it's a trap ter get us in thar an' then shut the door on us? I got in one hole this trip an' I don't intend ter get in another, not if I know myself an' I reckon as how I do."

"I guess you're right there. Come on, Jack, here goes for better or worse." And Bob, with Jack at

his side, began climbing up the side of the mound.

It was a drop of only about ten feet down to the ground inside the pyramid and soon they were standing there throwing the rays of the flash about them. But a careful scrutiny revealed only what they had seen from above. The ground was hard and smooth beneath their feet and although they went carefully over every foot of it, there was no break to indicate the existence of a trap door.

"But it must be in the floor if it's anywhere," Jack insisted after they had made the complete circuit.

"If we only had a pick-axe we'd soon know."

"Well, we haven't so here's where that hatchet has to suffer. Give me a shoulder and I'll go get it."

Standing on Bob's shoulders Jack was able to reach the opening above and in another minute had drawn himself up and disappeared from view. He was back again in a couple of minutes carrying the hatchet.

"Slats kicked like a steer," he chuckled as he dropped to his brother's side. "But I told him we'd be careful and not dull it any more than we could help and explained that it was the only way and he gave in."

"Well, it's apt to be a long job as we'd better go down not less than six inches because we don't want to miss it if it's here."

"You said it, but we won't need to dig holes less

than three feet apart because if there's a door here it would hardly be less than three or four feet long."

"I suppose not. Here, you hold the flash and I'll start in."

The ground was very hard and it took nearly ten minutes to make the first little hole.

"Does it dull it much?" Jack asked anxiously after Bob had been working for a couple of minutes.

"Some," Bob replied, feeling the edge of the hatchet. "But it can't be helped."

"We should worry," Jack laughed.

Taking turns they kept steadily at the work chopping out the small holes about three feet apart and by noon had covered about half the floor having made twenty-five holes.

"If we'd only started at the other side we might have struck it long before this," Jack panted as he wiped the sweat from his face.

Just then Slats shouted that dinner was ready and, again mounting Bob's shoulders Jack called for Slats to throw him a rope and soon he had Bob by his side. Although they had as yet found nothing the meal was a cheerful one and all were filled with hope that the afternoon would bring results.

"But I'll bet that hatchet won't cut hot butter," Slats sighed.

"Oh, I reckon we can sharpen it up a bit on a

stone," Jack told him, but Slats shook his head in doubt.

After dinner Slats suggested that he take a turn in the digging and that one of the boys stand watch but they insisted that they were not tired and he did not press the point probably feeling that they would all be safer with him on the outside.

"Where did you put the hatchet?" Bob asked a little later when they were again inside the mound.

"Why, I left it right here by this hole," Jack replied.

"You mean you think you did. Are you sure you didn't take it out with you? You see it isn't here."

"I know I didn't," Jack insisted.

"Then where can it be?" Bob threw the light all about the floor, but the hatchet was nowhere to be seen. "You must have taken it out," he insisted.

"Perhaps I must have. I'll acknowledge it looks that way, but just the same I didn't. You can see for yourself that I couldn't very well climb out of that hole from your shoulders with a hatchet in my hands."

For a moment the two boys looked at each other by the dim light of the torch.

"This is the spookiest thing yet," Jack finally declared. "That hatchet has just dissolved into thin air."

"It's certainly queer, but suppose you go out and

see if Slats has seen it. You might possibly have taken it, you know."

"No, I don't know, but I'll go."

"Nothing doing," he announced a few minutes later as he dropped to his brother's side. "But you ought to have seen Slats's face when I told him about it. We looked all over, but I knew we wouldn't find it and we didn't."

"Then someone has been in here since we went to dinner."

"Or something."

"What do you mean, something?"

"Well, a person isn't the only thing that could carry off a hatchet."

"But it's the only thing that would be likely to."

"I grant you that."

"But how in the name of common sense did he or it get in here?"

"He didn't come up through the ground, that's certain. Unless he made a hole and crawled back in and pulled the hole in after him."

"Of course it would have been possible for a man to have come in the same way we did while we were eating but it doesn't seem possible that he would have taken that risk."

"Not for the sake of a hatchet at any rate."

"But he might have wanted to see if we'd struck anything."

"Well, it's lucky we had another hunting knife," Jack said as he drew one from his pocket. "It'll be a good deal slower and harder work with this, but it's the best we've got."

"Before we do any more digging I think we better go outside and talk it over with Slats."

"But he doesn't know any more about it than we do," Jack objected.

"I know, but he's older and his advice is usually good."

"You're right there, come on."

"What do you think about it, Slats?" Bob asked as soon as they were outside once more.

"I think the mystery deepens, as the story books say," Slats declared shaking his head.

"I'll say it's deep," Jack agreed.

"Do you think anyone could have gone through that opening while we were eating dinner?" Bob asked.

"Wal, someone must have done that very same thing or else—"

"Or else what?" Jack demanded as he paused.

"Or else thar's another way inter the thing."

"And it must have been one of those Mexes or that girl or some party or parties unknown, as the coronor's jury would put it," Jack affirmed.

"An' I reckon it's a toss up among 'em," Slats added.

"If only the ground wasn't so hard here we might find some tracks if he or it or she got in this way," Bob suggested.

"Or them," Jack added.

"I don't believe it was a them," Slats declared.

"Well, what shall we do?" Bob asked. "Go on digging and forget the hatchet or hunt for it?"

"I reckon as how we might's well go on with the digging. We couldn't find that hatchet in a week of Sundays. Leastwise that's my bet."

"There's one thing we've overlooked," Jack said as Bob started to climb up the side of the pyramid.

"What's that?" he asked looking back.

"Why, we haven't tried to find out how that stone works."

"That's so, but I reckon it'll keep till we get through digging these holes."

"I suppose so," Jack agreed as he followed Bob up the side.

Jack was quite right when he said that it would be slower work digging with the knife than it had been with the hatchet. It was much slower and, when Slats shouted for them to come to supper, they had finished only ten more holes and about a quarter of the floor still remained untouched.

"Don't leave that knife here," Bob cautioned as they started to obey the summons. "We haven't any more tools to lose."

"You said a mouthful that time," Jack replied thrusting the knife into his belt."

"Didn't find anything, I suppose?" Slats greeted them.

"Not a thing except blisters," Jack told him.

"We'll know by noon tomorrow whether or not there's a doorway under the dirt," Bob said in an effort to encourage his brother.

CHAPTER XI.

TRAPPED.

It was broad daylight when Bob awoke the next morning. "That man didn't call me last night," he thought as he looked over to the other side of the tent and saw Jack still sleeping.

"Wal, yer see, yer did all the work yesterday an' I didn't do nuthin' an' I lowed yer needed the rest," Slats explained when taken to task a little later. "Now, don't say another word," he ordered as Jack was about to put in his oar. "I didn't need the sleep an' yer did an' that's all thar is ter it, see."

He had a good breakfast ready for them and both boys were touched by his kindness.

"Now for the final dig," Bob said as he drank his final cup of coffee.

"And I can tell you right now what the result will be," Jack declared mournfully.

But this time Jack was wrong for he had hardly begun on the first hole when his knife struck something hard and a little more digging convinced them that it was wood.

"I believe we've struck it at last," he said.

"Looks like it," Bob agreed.

The wood which he had struck was only about three inches beneath the surface but even so they knew they had a long job ahead of them to uncover even a small trap door with only a knife to work with.

"Try it over here," Bob suggested indicating a spot about two feet away.

Jack did so and his excitement increased when, at the same depth, he again struck wood.

"We've got it sure's guns," he shouted.

"What's that yer got?" Slats called from outside.

"I believe we've struck the door," Bob called back.

"Good boy. How long'll it take ter uncover it?"

"It'll take quite a while. The dirt is most as hard as rock and we've got nothing but the knife to work with." Bob had to shout almost at the top of his voice to make himself heard.

A moment later Slats poked his head in through the opening. "I couldn't find another knife that'd be any good but mebby yer can do sumpin' with this," he said as he let drop a narrow piece of stone about two feet long and with one sharp end. "Use it like yer would a ice chisel," he added.

Bob placed the flashlight, which he had been holding for Jack to see by, on the ground in such a position that its rays shone on the portion of the floor where they were at work and tried the stone. To his

joy he found that it was far more efficient than the knife although pretty hard on his hands. But that was a minor detail which caused him no worry, and at the end of an hour the entire door was uncovered. It was about two feet wide by a little more than three long and near one end was a large iron ring covered with a thick layer of rust.

"Looks like it's been there a long time," Jack mused.

"If it's what we think it is it has, several hundred years in fact," Bob told him.

"Well, it seems almost sacrilegious to disturb it but here goes," and Jack grasped the ring with both hands and pulled with all his strength.

"Not much disturbing yet," Bob grinned.

"Not so you'd notice it," Jack agreed. "Suppose you take hold too."

But their combined efforts were not sufficient to budge it and they decided that it would be necessary to go out and get something which they could use as a pry.

"But we'll get it if we have to burn it out," Jack declared as he mounted Bob's shoulders.

Bob waited inside and in a few minutes Jack reappeared with a stout stick of wood about six feet long and three inches in diameter.

"This was the only thing I could find," he said as he followed it to the ground.

"If it isn't rotten it may do the trick."

"Here's hoping."

The stick proved to be sound and, after a good deal of straining, the door yielded and the next moment they were throwing the rays of the light down the opening. A flight of rough stone steps led down for a distance of some twelve feet and ended in a small chamber which looked to be about five feet high. How large it was they could not see from where they stood.

"Going down?" Jack asked.

"Not yet. I think we'd better get outside and tell Slats about it before we do any exploring and I'd like to take a look at that swinging rock before we go any farther."

"How come?"

"Well, it just struck me that we've been overlooking a bet by staying in here."

"With Slats on watch outside? Nonsense."

"I don't think it is nonsense. Just think a minute. Suppose that rock should swing back right now and we couldn't get it open from in here. We know dead sure that he couldn't open it from the outside."

Bob had hardly spoken the words when they heard a grating sound and glanced up just in time to see the stone slowly swing shut. For a moment neither spoke. Then Jack whispered:

"What do you know about that?"

"I know that unless we can open it we're trapped."

"Trapped is right. Quick, let me get up on your shoulders and have a try at it."

Bob's fears were quickly realized for Jack found the rock flush with those adjacent to it and was unable to move it.

"Looks kind of serious," he said as he dropped to the ground.

"Slats!"

Bob shouted the word and listened for a reply. It came but so faint that they were unable to hear what he said.

"Can't understand you," he yelled back.

For perhaps two minutes there was no reply then Slats's voice reached them a little more plainly.

"Hear me now?"

"Yes. Where are you?" Jack shouted back.

"Got my mouth close to that rock," came the answer.

"Can you move it?"

"Just a minute and I'll try. No, can't budge it."

"What'll we do?"

"Wal, unless this rock opens agin the way it did afore thar's only one way fer yer ter get out an' that is ter dig."

"But we got nothing to dig with except the knife and that stone," Bob told him.

"Yer must get busy with them," Slats called back.

"If it's air tight in thar yer ain't got no time ter spare."

"But—"

"No but about it. Now listen. Can yer tell which is the north-west corner?"

"I think so."

"All right. Now go to that corner and knock on the stone an' if yer hear me knock back yer'll know yer're right. Start digging three feet from the corner an' I'll get sumpin' an' dig from the outside. Get me?"

They went at once to the corner which they believed to be right and after waiting a minute to give Slats time to get there, Bob knocked on the wall with the piece of stone. An answering rap told them that it was the right corner and, telling Jack to hold the light, Bob at once set to work.

"I think we can make better headway to take turns with the stone," he said. "That knife don't amount to much."

But their progress was painfully slow for the ground was very hard and the stone was at best a poor substitute for a shovel. But they both realized the seriousness of their position and that it would be useless to whine. Every little while a rap on the outside told them that Slats was there at work but, although they could hear him shout, the thick stone was so nearly sound proof that they could not un-

derstand what he said. They worked in short shifts, for they tired quickly, and at the end of an hour a depression about a foot across and five inches deep was all they had accomplished.

"Hope Slats is making better headway than we are," Jack paused.

"If he's found anything decent to dig with he probably is because the ground can't be so hard outside," Bob encouraged him.

Fortunately both had large handkerchiefs and with them they were able to protect to some extent their hands. But even with this protection the rough stone was hard to hold and soon blisters formed on their hands and the work seemed to get harder as they enlarged the hole.

"Do you suppose the pyramid sets on top of the ground?" Jack asked.

"Let's hope so," Bob replied as cheerfully as he was able.

"If it doesn't but goes down in the ground any we're beat," Jack panted as he straightened up and wiped the sweat from his face. "Seems to be getting kind of close in here," he added.

"That's imagination," Bob hastened to assure him. "There's a lot of air in here even if it's air tight and I don't see how it can be seeing that there's no cement between the rocks."

"But there are no cracks big enough to let light in."

"But there must be some big enough to let air in," Bob insisted, although in his heart he was afraid it was not so.

They had started the hole a few inches away from the wall as it seemed a bit softer than close against the rock, but now they decided they had better cut out the dirt intervening and see if the foundation extended beneath the surface. To their great disappointment they soon learned that the foundation did not rest on the surface of the ground but extended beneath, how far, of course they could not tell. But they kept bravely on hoping almost against hope that the foundation did not extend down very far.

"I tell you the air is getting bad," Jack declared a few minutes later.

Bob had been aware of the fact for some time, but had not mentioned it for fear of alarming Jack. But now it was noticeable that it was useless to deny it.

" 'Tis getting kind of sticky," he acknowledged. "But I reckon it'll not get much worse for quite a long time, long enough for us to get out anyway." And he breathed a silent prayer that it might be so.

Another hour passed during which they had spelled each other a dozen times, but they had not reached the bottom of the foundation although the

hole was nearly fifteen inches deep. It was not quite so hard now but it took so long to get the dirt out of the hole after it was loosened that their progress was even slower than at first.

"It's no use," Jack cried, throwing the stone down and sinking to the ground. "I'm all in."

"You take a good rest and I'll see what I can do," Bob consoled him. "I'm worth a couple of dead men anyway." And he picked up the stone and started to dig with an enthusiasm which Jack knew was forced for the sake of keeping up his courage.

Bob worked on until it seemed that he would drop and the sweat was rolling down his face while his breath came in choking sobs. He saw that Jack had fallen over on his side and he called him by name, but there was no response. For a moment he hesitated. He knew from his own sensations that the air was very bad and would not much longer support life and he wondered whether he ought to make an effort to arouse his brother. Would it not be more merciful to permit him to sleep than to call him back to the dreadful fate which now seemed almost certain. He was sure now that he would not be able to dig through in time and that unless help came from the outside, they were doomed. But he was not one to give up while a spark of life remained and, reaching over, he shook him at first gently and then harder.

"Can't you let a fellow sleep?" Jack muttered.

"Buck up, old man," Bob whispered in his ear. "While there's life there's hope you know."

"But I'm so sleepy," Jack whispered so low that Bob hardly caught the words.

"But Slats is apt to break through any minute now," Bob insisted.

"All right," was the low reply.

"Oh, God, send us help. Don't let us die here," Bob prayed and, as if in answer to the prayer, he heard the same creaking sound that had preceeded the closing of the stone, and almost instantly a shaft of light pierced the gloom of the chamber.

"Jack, boy, we're saved," he cried shaking his brother.

"All right."

There was no more life in the reply than there had been a few minutes previous and he knew that poor Jack was too far gone to realize what had happened. Running across the floor he yelled for Slats at the top of his voice and, a moment later, the latter's face was peering down from the opening.

"That rope, quick," Bob gasped.

"Whar's Jack?"

"He's down and out. Get the rope."

It seemed to the boy that Slats was gone a long time, but in reality it was less than a minute when the rope was dangling at his feet. He had already

dragged the unconscious boy to a spot directly beneath the opening and without loss of time he had the rope securely fastened about his chest and Slats was drawing him up.

"Don't bother about me," he ordered. "I'm all right. Just see if you can bring him round. It can't be too late." And then, as he saw the strong arms reach for his brother's form, he sank to the ground, not unconscious, but just dead tired, as he afterward expressed it. The air in the chamber was getting rapidly fresher and he recovered speedily so that in less than ten minutes he was trying to climb the rope which Slats had thrown back after having made the upper end secure in the crack between the two hinges on which the stone swung. But, after a vain effort, he had to give it up and wait until his strength more fully returned.

"You all right, Bob?"

It was Slats's voice and, looking up the boy saw his face framed by the opening.

"How's Jack?" he demanded ignoring the other's question.

"He comin' round all right. Catch a hold an' I'll pull yer up."

The news that Jack was all right did much toward restoring Bob's strength and it was only a minute or two before he was on the ground beside him.

"I thought you were gone that time, old man," he sobbed the tears running down his cheeks.

"I didn't know much about it," Jack returned a bit feebly, but it's all right now."

"Thank God," Bob said reverently and Slats, who was standing close by bowed his head.

"How far down had you dug?" Bob asked, turning to Slats.

" 'Bout a foot. Yer see all I could find ter dig with was a piece of an old tin can an' it wasn't much good."

"Then we'd never have made it. I couldn't have stood it more than a few minutes more and at the rate we were going I imagine it would have taken us several hours longer."

"An' then some, but as Jim Riley once said, 'all's well as ends well'," Slats quoted.

"I'm afraid you've got your authors twisted," Bob laughed.

"Not much I ain't. I read his book once," Slats seemed very sure of his ground and Bob let it go at that.

"Now then, I think we'd better have a look at that stone before we go any farther," Jack declared a half hour later.

"Don't you want to rest a while longer first?" Bob asked him.

"I'm as good as new now," he insisted.

"All right then, we ought to have done it before we went in there in the first place."

So the three together mounted the side of the pyramid. The stone was swung back so that it nearly, but not quite touched the wall and Slats, reaching in, pulled it to until it lacked but a few inches of being shut.

"Works easy 'nough," he declared.

"But how?" Jack asked.

"That's what we got ter find out."

"Well, I've hit on one part of it," Bob announced. "See that." And he pointed to the stone just above the opening.

In its center was a hole about an inch in diameter and in the hole what looked like a stone bolt.

"See if there isn't a hole to match it in the other stone," Bob suggested.

"Righto," Jack declared after feeling the top of the stone with his hand.

"Then that's what holds it shut."

"No doubt about it," Jack agreed. "But it doesn't tell us how it works."

Slats had pushed the stone back again and was leaning in through the opening with the flashlight.

"Here's how it's shut," he announced as he swung himself back. "Thar's a kind of a stone right back of whar this one opens that moves 'nough ter push it shut."

"But what pushes it open?" Jack asked.

"I dunno yet."

"Maybe it's hung in such a way that when that bolt is pulled up it will swing open of its own accord," Bob suggested.

"Mebby, but I don't jest see how," Slats said.

"Well, anyhow, it's up to us to see that it's fixed so that it can't be shut again while we're in there," Bob declared.

"Ah, the best way ter do it is ter drive a stick good an' hard in between the hinges."

"Good. You wait here a minute and I'll get the stick."

Bob was back in almost no time and in his hands he carried two stout pieces of wood and a fairly large stone.

"Catch 'em," he cried as he tossed one of the sticks to Jack.

"Why the two?" Jack asked.

"I thought we'd be playing it doubly safe if we drove in two instead of one. Then if one should fall out the other'd do the job," Bob explained.

In a moment Slats had driven the two pieces of wood securely in place using the stone as a hammer.

"Thar," he declared. "Them sticks won't fall out, not by themselves they won't. Now let's get sumpin' ter eat an' then we'll proceed with the investigations as it was."

"It's a cinch that someone works that stone," Jack remarked a little later as they were eating dinner.

"Naturally," Bob agreed.

"Then there must be someone inside the thing."

"Unless it's worked from the outside," Slats suggested.

"You think it is?" Jack asked.

"I dunno 'bout that. But where could thar be anyone in thar? Tell me that."

"I'll never do it, at least not yet," Jack shook his head.

"But someone stole the hatchet," Bob suggested.

"But that doesn't prove that he's in there now. He might have gone in and out again, you know," Jack explained.

"True", Bob agreed. "But, somehow, I hardly think he did it that way."

"Then you think he's still in there?"

"He or it, yes."

"What you mean, it?"

"I don't know," Bob confessed. "I guess I'm talking to hear myself. But when we find that hatchet, if we ever do, I'm betting we find it inside there."

"You may be right, but I'd like to know where whoever or whatever took it can be hiding," Jack said and then asked:

"Do you think there's another secret door?"

"Something like that."

"But why should there be two?"

"Ask me something easy," Bob laughed. "I'm only guessing, but it seems to me that it's more than likely there is such a thing, not opening outside perhaps, but in between the stone of the wall, if you get what I mean."

"I get you all right but what makes you think that?"

"Just a process of elimination. You see unless that hatchet was taken out the way we went in it must have been in some such way as I suggested."

"Well, it won't do any good to sit here and talk about it. Let's get going," Jack said as he got to his feet.

"Are we all going in this time?" Bob asked.

"We are not," Slats replied decidedly. "One of us is goin' ter stay right on the job out here. Yer can bet we ain't goin' ter take no more chances of gettin' caught in thar agin, not if the old man knows himself an', as I've said afore, somehow he thinks as how he does."

'I guess that's settled then," Bob laughed. "And all that remains is to decide who's going to be the one."

"I've decided that too," Slats declared. "I'm the victim."

"But—"

"No buts about it. Didn't I say as how I'd decided?"

CHAPTER XII.

THE "MYSTERY" TO THE RESCUE.

"HERE, let me go first."

The two boys were once more inside the pyramid and it was Bob who spoke.

"How come?" Jack had been about to start down the stone steps when his brother caught him by the arm and pulled him back. "What's the matter with me going first?"

"Oh, nothing, only I'm the older you know and you're apt to be rather reckless."

"Well, come on, I won't be this time," Jack laughed as he again started down, and this time Bob followed him.

It was as dark as pitch but they both had flash-lights and threw the rays ahead of them as they went down. At the foot of the flight of steps, twelve in number they found themselves in a small room square and not more than eight feet across. In the wall opposite the steps was an iron door closed with a large hasp and, so far as they could see from a hasty scrutiny, it was the only opening in the stone sides.

"It doesn't look as though that door had been opened very recently," Jack said as he placed his hand on the clasp and tried to lift it.

But the hasp had rusted and he was unable to move it.

"Have to have a rock or something to budge this thing," he said as he threw his flash about the room in search of an implement.

"You were right when you said that it hasn't been opened lately," Bob told him.

"Look up there in that corner," Jack whispered.

"I don't see anything. Yes I do too, and it needs investigating."

They hurried over to the corner and there, coming from a small hole in the rock close up against the ceiling, were two small copper chains.

"They are what works that rock," Jack declared.

"Looks like it," Bob agreed.

"And that means—"

"That someone's been here very recently," Bob finished.

"And that means—"

"That there's another way to get in here beside that trap door," Bob again finished the statement.

"And I reckon it's up to us to find it."

"It sure is, but there's one thing we've got to do first."

"What's that?"

"See that that trap door's fixed so that it can't be closed."

"You said it. Come on." And Jack jumped for the steps closely followed by Bob.

"We'd have been in a nice fix if whoever's doing all this monkey business should fasten that door down on us," he said as soon as they were again in the upper room.

"Well, probably Slats could get it open."

"Yes, provided he wasn't stopped."

"Anyhow we'll take no chances, and the best thing to do is to rip it off the hinges and throw it down the hole."

"If we can," Jack added.

It took all the strength they could muster but the wood, having been buried beneath the dirt for many years, was somewhat rotted and finally they succeeded in ripping out the nails with which the hinges were fastened and, in another moment the trap door was on the floor of the room below.

"There, I reckon it'll bother him or her or it to pen us down there," Jack declared as he started down the steps again.

"I feel easier in my mind anyhow," Bob agreed.

"Shall we try the chains?"

"Not now. If Slats should see that rock move he'd have a caniption fit."

"That's so," Jack laughed. "Well, we can leave

that till later. I reckon there's no doubt, but what they'd move it all right and that's one mystery solved."

"But there are others."

"I'll say there are, and, believe me, we're the solvers."

"Perhaps," Bob's voice expressed doubt, but Jack did not appear to notice it.

He was already going over one of the four sides inch by inch searching for a clue to the secret entrance which they felt sure must exist. For two hours they kept at it and finally were obliged to acknowledge to each other that it was beyond them.

"This place has more secrets than Carter has liver pills," Jack declared after he had made the round of the walls three times.

"But there must be someway to get it," Bob insisted.

"Of course there must, but it's just as certain that we can't find it."

"Well, what'll we do next?"

"Try to get that door open."

"But it wouldn't be safe to go through it till we find that entrance. I will not go through any door unless I am certain that it can't be closed behind me. One experience, such as we had, is enough for yours truly."

"You're right, of course, but what'll we do? We don't seem to be getting anywhere just now."

"Well, it must be about four o'clock; a quarter past to be exact and we haven't time to do a lot more today anyhow, so I move that we call it a day and get out and report to Slats."

"I suppose we might's well," Jack agreed but added: "I kind of hate to leave it in such an unsettled condition."

"So do I, but I reckon it won't run away," Bob told him.

Just as they were about to start up the steps the muffled sound of a shot caused them to look at each other with worry in their eyes.

"What was it?" Bob asked.

"It was a shot all right but it wasn't our signal," Jack asserted.

"Then come on and make it snappy. It must mean that Slats is in trouble, and perhaps worse."

They hurried up the steps and ran across to the rope and Bob went up hand over hand closely followed by Jack. No one was in sight as they slid to the ground and quickly made a circuit of the pyramid. Then Bob called Slats's name, at first softly and then louder until finally he was shouting almost at the top of his voice. But there was no reply and for a moment the boys again looked at each other.

"Doesn't it beat the bugs?" Jack groaned.

"As the fellow said, 'it's just one thing after another'," Bob agreed.

"What'll we do? I've asked that question so many times in the last three days that I'll be asking it in my sleep first thing I know."

"And I reckon I've said I don't know about as many times. But now I think we'd better just wait a bit and see if he doesn't turn up. No use in going off half cocked, you know."

"I know, but I'm not strong for this waiting stuff," Jack growled.

"I know you're not and neither am I for that matter, but there are times when it's the only thing to do and it seems to me that this is one of them."

"Oh, I know you're right, all right," Jack agreed. "But, just the same I'd sure like to know what's what."

"My bet is that he saw one of those fellows and fired to scare him and then put off after him."

"Or it might have been that girl he saw."

"He'd hardly have fired had it been she."

"Not if he knew it was she, but maybe he didn't know who it was."

Bob had stepped to the corner of the pyramid and, as Jack made the last remark, he shouted:

"We'll know in a minute because here he comes."

"Did I scare yer?" Slats asked a moment later as he joined them.

"Did you scare us? Look at my hair. If it isn't white then it's a wonder.

"It's a wonder then 'cause it's no different nor it has been right along," Slats laughed.

"But where you been?" Bob asked.

"I've shore been a plenty. Yer see, jest afore I fired that shot I saw a face peepin' out from behind that bush off thar an—"

"Was it one of the Mexes?" Jack interrupted.

"I reckon, but I ain't shore fer a fact. I jest got a sight of it an' it dodged back an' I pulled my gun an' let her go inter the air jest ter let him know as how I was on the job. Then I hot footed it after him."

"You sure it wasn't that girl?" Bob asked.

"I couldn't sware ter it as I told yer, but I don't think it was."

"And you didn't get another sight of him?"

"Nary a peep an' I reckon I hunted a lot."

"Then we've missed another bet," Bob sighed.

"Looks like it, but maybe thar'll be another time. But what did yer find inside?"

Bob told him about the door in the lower room and the chains and he agreed with them that they undoubtedly worked the swinging stone.

"We didn't try it for fear it would scare you," he added. "But now you know about it suppose we go back and make sure of it."

"Good idea, but don't yer go through that door, that is, if yer get it open, till we know sumpin' more about this business," Slats ordered.

The boys promised and hastened back to the lower chamber and, catching hold of one of the chains, Bob gave it a strong pull. But is was a failure so far as results were concerned.

"Try the other one," Jack advised. "Probably you've got hold of the one that opens it."

The other chain when pulled yielded and Slats's voice was heard yelling that the stone was moving.

"Whoever did it made a good job of it," Bob declared. "It doesn't take hardly any force to move it."

"Try the other now," Jack proposed.

"It works all right now," Bob declared as he gave the other chain a pull and found that it yielded.

"Now let's see if we can get that door open," Jack proposed picking up a stone he had brought in with him. "We don't have to go through it, you know."

Bob held the flash while Jack began hammering at the hasp, and it was only a few minutes before he had succeeded in loosening it. A strong pull swung the door open on its rusty hinges.

As the door swung open a strong draft of air was perceptible and the rays of the flash disclosed a passage about six feet high and three wide which

sloped downward for a distance of seven or eight feet and then turned sharply to the right.

"You stay here and I'll see where it goes," Jack said as he stepped forward.

"Not much, you won't," Bob snapped as he caught hold of his arm and pulled him back. "Remember what Slats ordered and what we promised."

"So we did. I forgot for the moment. Let's get back and go into executive session with him and decide what's to be done. And, for goodness sake let's make it snappy."

The session was snappy enough to suit even Jack for, contrary to his usual conservativeness, Slats declared that it was time they were doing something definite.

"Our grub's about run out seeing as how we haven't had time to do any huntin' an' sumpin's got to be done right quick or we'll have ter go on short rations."

"Atter boy," Jack clapped his hands and even Bob looked pleased.

"And what's your plan?" the latter asked.

"Wal, yer said as how that was a draft, didn't yer?"

"Yep, there was a draft all right," Jack assured him.

"Then thar must be another opening somewhar."

"You don't suppose it could be in that cave, do you?" Bob asked.

"I don't think so. I looked that cave over prutty thorough like."

"Well, you haven't told us what we're going to do yet," Jack broke in impatiently.

"Now don't go ter hurryin' me none or yer'll get me rattled. My idea is jest this. Jack'll stand guard on them steps whar he can see what's goin' on in both rooms an' Bob'll stay outside here."

"I'm agoin' ter explore that passage."

"But—"

"No buts about it. I jest won't let you boys go inter it and that settles that."

"Seeing that he had his mind made up and knowing that it would be a waste of time to attempt to change it, they made no further objections and, after slipping new batteries into their flashlights, Slats and Jack started up the side of the pyramid.

"Keep your eyes open," Slats called back.

"You bet," Bob replied.

"An' if yer see anything don't yer dare ter chase it."

"I'll stick around," Bob promised.

A moment later Slats and Jack disappeared through the opening and Bob was alone on the outside. For a time he walked slowly around the pyramid keeping his eyes on the surounding bushes. How

still it was and peaceful. Not a leaf stirred on the trees and, save for the occasional cry of a bird there was absolutely no sound. An hour passed and he was beginning to wonder if it was not about time for the others to put in an appearance as it was past time for supper. He would have set about preparing the meal, but he feared he might miss something if he did not watch every minute and that he could not do and get supper at the same time. Slats had seen someone and that same someone might still be lurking about and besides there were two others somewhere near and he did not want to miss either of the Mexicans or the girl in case any one of them should be spying.

Another half hour passed and dusk was beginning to fall. "If they don't show up pretty soon I'll be getting the fidgets," he said half aloud. The thought had hardly passed through his mind when his eye caught a movement just on the edge of the fringe of bushes. He strained his eyes as the gathering gloom made it impossible to see distinctly for more than a few feet. There was surely someone or something over there and, pulling his automatic from his pocket, he stole softly toward the corner of the enclosure where he had seen the object moving.

Half way across he stopped and, for a moment, watched the spot but now he could detect nothing suspicious. "Guess whatever it was has sneaked

away," he thought as he again stepped forward. A rustle in the bushes caught his ear and he again stopped now only a few feet from the edge of the clearing. He could see nothing but, now and then, a soft rustle told him that what he was seeking was still there.

"Who's there?" he demanded in a firm though not loud tone.

There was no reply and, after waiting a minute and failing to again hear the rustling, he repeated the question a little louder.

"Who's there?"

Still there was no answer and he stood for a moment uncertain what course to pursue. To go into that thick bush would, he realized, be extremely dangerous if one or both of the Mexicans were there, as they would know exactly where he was. Then again he remembered that Slats had forbidden him to leave the enclosure. Darkness was settling rapidly and he was about to turn back when he heard a soft whirring sound and a loop of rope settled over his head and was immediately pulled taut pinning his arms to his sides. So sudden was the attack that his revolver was jerked from his hand and fell to the ground. Like a flash he stooped to recover it but he was too late for he was pulled from his feet and dragged into the bushes.

"Now keep still and you may not get hurt but one

yip and it'll be the last one you'll ever make in this world," a voice whispered in his ear.

At the same instant he was seized by both arms and dragged to his feet. That he was again in the power of the two Mexicans was certain although in the dim light he was unable to get a good look at their faces.

"Come on, now," one of them demanded and he knew it would be useless to resist.

A moment later and they were out where it was comparatively open and he had no difficulty in recognizing his captors.

"What's the big idea?" he asked boldly.

"Oh, nothing except that we need you in our business. Leaving two men in a cave to starve is one of the minor scores we have to settle."

"But we came the next morning to set you free. We didn't intend you to starve."

"Yes, you did—not."

"But I tell you we did."

"And I tell you you did not, and what I say goes just now."

"All right, have it your own way."

"We intend to," the man laughed unpleasantly.

"What are you going to do with me?" Bob demanded.

"Little boys should be seen and not heard."

"All right."

"Sure it's all right. Come on now and mind no funny business."

The speaker took hold of Bob's arms and was about to start when there came a startling interruption.

"Hands up."

The order was given in a feminine voice only a few feet distance and, although he could not see the speaker, a thrill shot through Bob's body. He had heard that voice before.

"I've got you covered and, although you can't see me, I can see you plenty well enough to shoot straight and I'm a good shot. So keep them up good and high," the voice went on.

At the first command both men had raised their arms as high as they could get them and Bob heard a low curse issue from the lips of the larger of the two.

"Who are you?" he demanded in a loud tone, but Bob noted that there was more than a hint of fear in the voice.

"Never mind that," was the low reply.

"Well, what do you want us to do?" the man asked.

"Take that rope off the boy and mind you don't reach for your gun. I can see every move you make and a mistake in that direction will be a very serious one for you."

The man obeyed muttering beneath his breath.

"That's right. Now up with them again," came the order.

His hands shot toward the sky and Bob fancied he heard a low chuckle.

"They're cowards all right," he thought. "I don't believe she could hit a barn door in this light."

"Now, boy, you get back to the stone pile," she ordered.

"But—" Bob began, but she interrupted.

"Please do as I say."

"I sure will," Bob told her and at once stepped back.

"Now you fellows beat it and mind I'll be right behind you and at the first false move one of you'll stop a bullet. Now, forward march."

Bob heard her give the order as he stole slowly back. He wished he could have seen her and told her how much they appreciated what she had done for them but, under the circumstances, all he could do was to obey her commands.

As he came close to the pyramid he made out two forms climbing down from the opening and his heart leaped at the thought that Slats and Jack were safe for he had begun to worry over their long stay.

"It's about time you were coming out," he declared.

"Is supper ready?" Jack asked as he jumped to the ground.

"Hardly."

"Why, what's up?" Jack asked quickly catching the note in his brother's voice.

"I came pretty near being. But I'll start at the beginning."

"Well, what do you know about that?" Jack said when he had told his story.

"I know as how it's got ter come ter a show down afore long," Slats declared.

"But you haven't told me how you made out," Bob said.

"Let's get supper goin' fust an' I'll tell yer though thar ain't much to tell."

"But tell me this much, did you find out whether or not it is the mine?"

"It's the mine all right. No doubt 'bout that part of it. The question is whether they ever found any gold in it an' if they did whether they left any fer us."

"Then you didn't find any gold?"

"Not yet, but I didn't have time ter look much."

While they were eating supper Slats related his experience.

"After that passage turns ter the right it goes along down hill fer about a hundred feet or so an' then comes inter a chamber which I reckon was the

mine. It's 'bout a hundred feet or so across it an' prutty nigh twenty feet high. Some of the rock looks ter me like low grade ore and mighty low at that, but of course I couldn't tell fer sure without havin' it analyzed."

"How about that other opening?" Jack asked.

"I didn't see it but I reckon we can find it sooner nor later. I noticed that draft and so, of course, thar must be one."

"But it didn't take you most two hours to see that much, did it?" Bob asked as Slats stopped.

"I was lookin' fer another way ter get inter that second chamber," he explained.

"Bet you didn't find it."

"You win."

"We'll have to have a mess of trout for breakfast tomorrow," Bob declared.

"And I'm the boy that'll get up early and get 'em," Jack volunteered.

Tired out with the exertions of the day they went to bed as soon as the supper things were cleared away resolved that the morrow should see a definite advancement in their investigation. Slats, as usual, took the first watch after Bob had made him promise that he would call him on time.

CHAPTER XIII.

ONE MYSTERY SOLVED.

TRUE to his promise Jack had a mess of trout sizzling in the pan, before the sun had been up an hour, the following morning. The night had passed without incident and all three were keyed to a high pitch of enthusiasm.

"Gee, but I wish we could all go in together," Jack declared as he reached for his sixth trout.

"It's out of the question," Slats declared.

"But it's my turn on the inside," Bob insisted.

"Wal, I reckon it's safe enough in thar now an' mebby it'd be best fer me to keep watch on the outside," Slats consented.

Jack agreed to again take the intermediate station and, so soon as breakfast was over the two boys were off leaving Slats to clean up.

"Now don't yer go ter takin' no chances," the latter called as they were about to go through the opening.

"We won't," they both called back.

The draft which had been so evident the day be-

fore was scarcely noticeable now as they came to the stone steps, but Bob gave it as his opinion that it was because the wind had been changed.

Leaving Jack sitting on the stone steps, Bob passed through the doorway into the passage. As Slats had told him the passage dipped down all the way and, by the time he had reached the other chamber he judged that he was down not less than forty or fifty feet.

"It doesn't look very promising for a fact," he mused as he stood near the center of the room and flashed the rays from his torch over the walls. "But it's certain that there has been mining done here and, judging from the amount of work digging that passage way and everything, it must have been rich once."

He quickly decided to have a look for the opening which he felt sure must be there, so he began a careful search, examining the wall carefully foot by foot. He had completed about half the circuit of the chamber when, happening to throw his light upward, he saw, almost directly over his head, a jutting out of the rock for a distance of a foot or more. The ledge so formed appeared to be fully two feet from the top of the wall and he at once came to the conclusion that the opening was there.

"But I'll have to have a rope to get up there with," he told himself.

So he retraced his steps and told Jack what he had found.

"Of course it may not be it, but it's the best bet we have so far."

"You wait here and I'll get the rope," Jack said and was off before he had time to offer to go himself.

He was back in less than five minutes with the rope and the announcement that Slats said not to go through the opening in case he found it.

"He says there's no telling but what those Mexes might be at the other end of it."

"All right, what he says goes."

Back in the chamber again he quickly made a slip noose in the rope and after three unsuccessful attempts, succeeded in throwing it over the rock and pulling it tight. Then he went up hand over hand and drew himself onto the ledge. As he had hoped and expected there was a hole in the wall between two rocks and he could feel a fairly strong current of air.

"It's it all right," he told himself as he lowered himself to the floor. "Gee, but I wish Slats hadn't told me not to go through it."

He hurried back to tell Jack what he had discovered.

"But that doesn't tell us how somebody gets in here and works those chains. Whoever it is didn't

come through that door and so it's dead sure he didn't come through that hole," Jack declared.

"Not unless there's another passage between the two rooms," Bob suggested.

"Don't believe it for a minute. You see it took some time and some work to dig that passage and why should they make two of them?"

"Why indeed? I only suggested it. I didn't say I thought so."

"Well, you'd better get back and see what else you can find."

The floor of the chamber was of stone and fairly smooth and, after he had completed the circuit of the walls, looking for he hardly knew what, he turned his attention to the floor. He had the idea in his mind that they had not as yet found the place where gold had been taken in any large quantity. He had some knowledge of gold ore and, as Slats had said, if there was gold in the walls of the chamber it was there in very small quantity, and, unless there were still rich deposits there why should anyone have taken the trouble to make a map of the place?

Back and forth he stepped throwing the rays of the torch on the floor in front of him, and he had been thus engaged for some twenty minutes when he felt a slight movement beneath his foot. Yes, a large flat stone, which fitted so closely in the floor

that, had he not felt it move, would undoubtedly have escaped notice as a separate portion, tipped decidedly when he put his weight on one corner of it. In an instant he was down on his knees scraping away the slight deposit of dirt with his pocket knife. The stone, he soon learned, was a large one being about two feet long and some eighteen inches wide, although it was not regular in shape. It fitted very closely in its place evidently having been shaped for the space which it occupied. Tapping on it with the handle of the knife he fancied that it gave forth a hollow sound, but was not certain.

"It may and it may not amount to anything but I'm going to get that stone out of there if it's a possible thing," he told himself as he got to his feet.

He knew that some kind of a tool would be necessary which could be driven into the crack as there was nothing on which a hold could be obtained on the surface of the stone.

"It'll have to be something fairly sharp," he told himself as he stood looking down at the stone.

A few minutes later he told Jack what he had found and they quickly decided to go out and tell Slats and see what they could scare up to use as a pry.

"The plot shore thickens as I once heard a feller say in a show," Slats grinned after Bob had told him of his find.

"Heard or seen anything suspicious out here?" Bob asked

"Nope, not a thing."

"Well, have we anything I can use as a pry?"

"Dunno of a thing. It's a shame we didn't bring a small bar with us."

"It sure is, but—"

"How wide is the crack?" Slats interrupted.

"It's mighty small," Bob told him. "In fact I could hardly get the blade of my knife in it."

"An' that makes it bad," Slats mused.

"Didn't it open up any when you stepped on it?" Jack asked.

"Not a bit. You see it only tipped the least and it fits so snug that it wouldn't help any."

"Yer wait a minute. I jest thought of sumpin," Slats said suddenly as he started for the other side of the pyramid.

He was back in a minute with an iron bar about three feet long in his hand.

"Found this half buried in the dirt the other day," he explained.

"But it's no good," Bob told him as he took the bar in his hand. "The end is all of an inch thick and—"

"Don't I know that? But what's the matter with makin' it sharp?"

"How?"

"Wal, we've got a small hammer an' if we heat the end good an' hot I reckon mebby we can pound it out some."

"I'll say we can," Jack cried. "Let's get a fire going and then we'll turn blacksmiths."

"An' while yer're gettin' the fire goin' I'll see what I can find fer an anvil. It's got ter be a good rock shore pop."

In a few minutes the boys had a good fire going and by the time they had secured a good bed of coals Slats came puffing up lugging in his arms a stone which must have weighed all of a hundred pounds.

"Found it down by the brook," he panted. "It's a peach of a piece of flint an' I'm reckonnin' it'll make one dandy anvil. Got that bar in the fire?"

"Sure thing," Jack told him pointing.

"Get her good an' hot."

"You bet."

For some time they sat by the fire every few minutes pulling the bar out to see if it was hot enough. Suddenly Bob, who sat facing the pyramid, cried in a low voice:

"Look! The stone's moving."

For an instant they gazed spellbound at the stone which was indeed slowly closing. It moved until it was about half shut and then stopped.

"That's as far as the stick will let it go," Jack whispered.

"Come on and make it snappy," Bob said as he sprang to his feet. "Now's our time to find out what moves it."

"You bet," Jack cried as he too jumped up.

"Now yer be careful," Slats called after them as they raced for the pyramid.

"You bet," Jack called back.

The stone was closed far enough to make it hard work squeezing through but they managed it being careful not to move the stone for fear of alarming whoever was trying to close it.

"Not a sound, now," Bob cautioned as they dropped to the floor. "And don't use your torch till we get to the steps."

In the darkness they groped their way to the top of the flight of steps and as Bob felt the top step with his foot he clutched Jack by the arm. The sound of faint breathing was heard below them, followed an instant later by the sound of the chains hitting the side of the wall as an unseen hand jerked them. Followed a slight brushing sound.

"Now, your light," Bob whispered as he flashed on his torch.

The sight which met their eyes was so totally unexpected that, for as much as a minute, neither boy moved nor spoke. For, there at the foot of the

steps, looking at them with blinking eyes, crouched a monkey.

"Well, I'll be—" Jack finally began and then stopped short for, at the sound of his voice the spell which held the monkey was broken and with a shrill cry it darted off to the right and, almost before the boys could turn the rays of their torches, had disappeared into a hole in the wall. The hole was closed immediately by the closing of a swinging stone."

"Can you beat it?" Jack gasped.

"It beats the Dutch," Bob agreed. "And to think I couldn't find that opening."

"But a monkey, and it wasn't a very big one at that."

"Let's go down and see if we can open that stone."

It was little wonder that the stone door had escaped Bob's eye, for, so perfectly did it fit that, even now, they could hardly be sure just which one it was. For a few minutes they tried by pressing on different places to open it, but they made no headway and finally Bob gave it as his opinion that it could be opened only from the other side.

"We'll have to catch him in here or else find where he comes out," he declared.

"Well, there's one more mystery solved anyway."

"Part of one at least. It's still a mystery to me how that monkey ever learned to work those chains."

"That's so, and it'll probably always remain a mystery, but, after all, it's only a minor point. We know he did work it and that's a whole lot."

"I'll say it is. But Slats'll be worrying his head off if we don't get back soon so come on."

"Wal?" Slats asked as they rejoined him.

"You bet it is," Jack laughed.

"Give you ten guesses as to who worked the stone," Bob grinned.

"If it's that hard I reckon you'd better tell me."

"It's a monkey," Jack broke in.

"Go on."

"Honest injun," Jack insisted and proceeded to tell him all about it.

"Now don't that beat the bugs?" Slats said as soon as he had finished.

"It's pretty conclusive evidence that neither the Mexes or the girl know anything about the inside of the place," Bob told them.

"I never really thought they did," Jack said.

"Wal, I reckon this bar's hot enough ter start on," Slats said pulling it from the fire.

He had placed the rock only a few feet from the fire and now began hammering the end of the bar. They all saw at once that they had a long job ahead of them for the hammer was only a small one and each blow made but slight impression. Still the end

of the bar had been flattened slightly when Slats thrust it back in the coals.

"Reckon it'll take all of three hours but it can be done that's shore," he declared as he wiped the sweat from his face.

"I reckon I might's well catch some more trout for dinner while we're waiting," Jack suggested.

"You have intelligent ideas once in a while," Bob grinned.

It took many reheatings before the end of the bar was drawn out to suit Slats, but finally, an hour after they had eaten dinner, it was accomplished.

"Now get me a can of water an' I'll temper it," he said as he put the bar back in the coals for the last time. "We want it good an' hard you know."

This was soon accomplished and by half past two Bob was back in the lower chamber with Jack on guard at the steps. As he had expected the end of the bar was still too blunt to permit of insertion in any of the cracks and, choosing the most likely appearing spot, he began chipping away the rock. The stone was hard but Slats had done his work well when he tempered the bar and he could not see that the edge was being dulled to any appreciable extent. Finally he got the hole deep enough so that he could get sufficient leverage and it was easy to raise it up so that he could get his hands on the edge. The stone was not more than a couple of inches thick and,

once having gotten hold of it, it was not difficult to tip it over. His heart beat with great rapidity as he threw the light into the hole for he felt that he was to see something which had been hidden from all eyes for a number of hundred years. But when he saw what the hole contained his breath came in a hurried gasp. It was not more than ten inches deep but it was filled nearly to the top with nuggets of gold, varying in size from a small marble to lumps half the size of his fist.

For the moment he could only stare at the uncovered hoard in amazement. To whom did all that wealth belong? Why had it been left there? Who had buried it? These and other questions ran through his mind, but he could think of no answer to them. Finally, leaving the hole uncovered, he hastened back to where Jack was sitting and told him of his discovery.

"There must be enough there to pay us for coming even if we don't find any more," Jack said when he had finished.

"There must be nearly half a bushel. But does it belong to us?"

"Of course. Who has a better right to it?"

"Probably you're right, but somehow it doesn't quite seem so."

"Don't be foolish. Think how long the stuff has been there. It would be impossible to find the

decendants of the people who worked this mine several hundred year ago."

"I suppose so," Bob agreed slowly. "But let's go tell Slats about it."

"It was probably the tag end of a big pocket they found somewhere in thar," Slats declared when the boys had told their story.

"And you think we have a right to it?" Bob asked.

"Of course we have," Slats replied.

"Then we can start for home in the morning?" Jack asked.

"Don't see why not. I don't believe we'd find any more if we hunted a year 'cause I looked the place over prutty thorough like an' I'm telling yer it's mighty low grade stuff even if thar's any gold in it at all. Of course there might be another cache somewhars, but I doubt it."

"Well, it's enough for a good summer's work let me tell you," Bob declared.

Taking two stout sacks, which they had brought with them, the two boys returned to the chamber and a half hour later were exhibiting the treasure to Slats in the little tent.

"It's prutty nigh pure gold," the latter declared as he picked up piece after piece and examined it.

"Now if we could only solve the mystery of the girl I'd be completely satisfied," Bob sighed.

"Maybe we will," Jack told him and added: "I've

got a good sized hunch that we're not out of the woods yet."

"Yer mean we're goin' ter have more trouble?" Slats asked.

"Of course I don't know that we are and goodness knows I hope we aren't but that's what my hunch tells me."

"An' I'm afraid yer hunch is a good one or a bad one more likely," Slats said slowly. "Did yer ever feel as though yer were bein' watched an' couldn't see a single soul?"

"I sure have," Jack replied.

"Wal, that's jest the way I've been feelin' all afternoon. But I haven't really seen a soul, that is, I couldn't sware that I have but a dozen times I've turned quick like an' thought as how I saw a pair of eyes watchin' me from them bushes. Three times I ran thar as fast as my legs would take me an' didn't find a thing."

"I haven't for a minute believed that those Mexicans have given up," Bob told them. "And they've probably been watching all the time. You know I've an idea that one of their plans has been to let us find it if we could and then to take it away from us. They'd likely figure that it would be less work that way than to get us out of the way and then have to hunt for it themselves."

"You think he's right, Slats?" Jack asked.

"Wouldn't wonder. Ter tell the truth I've kinder had that same idea myself."

"Well, if two great minds settle on one thing like that why, I reckon it must be so," Jack grinned. "Anyhow," he added, "I reckon it's up to us to keep our eyes open."

"You bet," Bob said. "It would be a pity to lose it now that we've found it."

"If that idea of yer's is right I reckon as how we are apt ter hear from them fellers afore ter-morrow mornin'," Slats said soberly.

"You think so?" Bob asked.

"Wal, of course, they may decide ter trail us and make the attack jest afore we get to the town. Come ter think on it that seems what I'd do in case I was in their place. Yer see 'twould be less trouble fer them than ter take it away from us now an' have ter tote it in themselves."

"It's a good point all right, but we must be on our guard every minute just the same," Bob declared.

"Shore we must," Slats agreed.

"I'd like to do a bit more exploring around that pyramid," Bob began but Slats interrupted him.

"So would I, but I reckon as how we'd better let well enough alone. I'd like ter find out 'bout that monkey an' whar them other passages lead ter, but we're mighty short on grub, an', remember, we've

got two rascals ter reckon with. No, we'd best beat it while the beatin's good."

"You're right, of course," Bob agreed.

"Sure he is," Jack broke in. "I tell you the quicker we get back to civilization the sooner."

"Then we'll get an early start in the morning?" Bob asked.

"Yer said it," Slats nodded.

"Will we go back the way we came?" Jack asked.

"I don't think so, not exactly. I think as how if we keep more ter the right we'll be on higher ground an' thar won't be so much of that vine stuff ter cut through. It may be a little longer, but I reckon maybe we'll more'n make up fer it," Slats explained.

"How about following our tracks back?" Jack asked. "We wouldn't have to cut much of the vines then would we?"

Slats shook his head.

"Them vines twist an' squirm so that I reckon it'd be 'bout as bad as afore even if we could keep right ter them which same I doubt. No, I think we'd better try another way," the man told him.

"It was only a suggestion. Of course you know best," Jack conceeded.

"Then I reckon as how yer'd better go an' hook a good mess of fish. Get 'nough fer supper an' breakfast an' if thar's any left over we can take 'em 'long

with us. When we get off I want ter make the best time possible."

"And I guess I'd better go with him and keep an eye on him," Bob suggested.

"Shore thing," Slats agreed and, somewhat to Bob's surprise, Jack offered no objection.

The fish bit well and Jack fished while Bob kept a careful watch and in the course of an hour the latter declared that they had all they could possibly use.

"They won't keep more than twenty-four hours without ice," he declared.

"All right, but wait a minute till I land this fellow," Jack replied as he reeled in a half pounder.

Slats had a fire going when they got back and supper was a merry meal despite the danger which they all knew hovered over them.

"Now as soon's we get these things—" Slats began at the conclusion of the meal, but the sentence was never finished for they were startled by a voice only a few feet away.

"Hands up!"

They all turned at the command to find themselves looking into the business ends of two automatics in the hands of the two Mexicans.

"Hands up!"

The order was repeated and this time they

hastened to obey for there was in the man's voice that which told them he meant business.

"I'll keep them covered while you tie them up," the larger man said, turning to his companion. "And see that you do a good job at it," he added.

"Don't try anything," Slats whispered, as the man stepped forward drawing some pieces of rope from his pocket.

It was immediately evident to them that he knew his business well and in less than five minutes they were all stretched on the ground their ankles securely tied together and their hands bound behind their backs.

"Got 'em good and tight?" the larger man asked.

"They'll never get loose by themselves," the other assured him.

"They'd better not." Then turning to the trio he said with a smile:

"It's very good of you to find the gold for us. You see we had an idea you could do it. Now, you're going to take it back for us you know and if you're good and do as you're told we'll let you go as soon as we get back to town, but if you try any funny business—well, you'd better think twice before you do. And another thing," he added, "if you expect any help from that girl you'll be disappointed. We've fixed her so that she won't bother us again."

A shudder ran through Bob's frame at the man's

word. Had they killed her? He breathed a silent prayer that such was not the case, but he was sick at heart at the thought of what might have befallen her.

As soon as the larger man had examined their bonds and satisfied himself that they were securely bound he went into the tent and reappeared a moment later dragging the two sacks.

"It's quite a good haul," he smiled.

"How much is it worth, José?" the other asked.

"Enough to make us rich for life."

"Don't forget you promised to split fifty fifty."

"Fifty fifty is right."

"How are you fellows fixed for grub?" José asked, turning to Slats.

"Not much left," Slats grumbled.

"Well, I see you've got some nice trout left. Get some of them in the frying pan, Carlos, and I guess we can make a meal with what we've got.

CHAPTER XIV.

TURNING THE TABLES.

THAT was the longest night Bob ever remembered to have passed. Shortly before dark the two Mexicans had dragged him and Jack into the tent and left them with a warning that any attempt at escape would bring quick and severe punishment. What they had done with Slats they had no way of knowing. Their bonds were tied so tight that they knew it was useless to try to free themselves although Bob did make an attempt on the ropes on Jack's wrists with his teeth. But the rope was tarred and he could make absolutely no impression. Uncomfortable at first the cords before long were causing actual pain and, after standing it for a couple of hours, Bob shouted for help and when the larger man poked his head inside the flap, he asked:

"How about loosening up on these ropes a bit? You've got them so tight it hurts."

"I very much fear you'll have to stand it till morning," the man smiled. "Remember you got away once and we don't intend that it shall happen again."

"All right, but if the tables are turned again don't expect any mercy."

"I wouldn't threaten if I were you," he advised ominously. "There is to be no more turning of the tables as you call it."

"He feels pretty sure of himself, doesn't he?" Jack said as soon as he had left the tent.

"He sure does, but the thing that worries me most is what they may have done to that girl. Do you suppose they've killed her?"

"Not likely. If they were so keen on killing anyone I reckon we'd have got it before this. They could have shot us almost anytime they wanted to, for I guess they've been watching us most of the time as things have turned out."

Sound sleep was out of the question with the rope biting into their flesh and their hands and feet as well, almost numb, but both got a cat nap now and then. It was hardly light when José paid them another visit and dragged them out of the tent.

"We are going to untie you so that yau can eat and then you're to pack up and get ready. I hardly need tell you that you will be watched every minute and the very first sign of resistance or attempt to escape you will be shot."

The boys had not been searched the night before but before undoing their bonds he took away their revolvers and even their pocket knives. They had

been much worried about Slats, but now their fears in that direction were relieved as they saw him bustling about getting breakfast under the watchful eye of the man Carlos.

"Be mighty careful what you do," he whispered to Bob a little later as he passed close to him. "We may get a chance later but they got all the aces jest now."

The meal prepared by Slats was meager almost to the point of extinction but, after the two Mexicans had eaten, he and the boys were allowed to partake of what was left.

"Now you get packed up as soon as you know how and we'll be off. Our animals are only a half mile from here and we'll pick them up as we go along," the man ordered.

Knowing that it would be useless to resist they fell to and in a half hour were ready for the start. The Mexicans had tied the two sacks of gold together and thrown them over the back on the pack burro. Slats and the two boys were ordered to mount their burros and, while Carlos kept his gun on them the other tied their feet together beneath the bellies of the animals.

"We'll leave you the use of your hands as long as you behave," he told them.

Then they started, José leading the way and Carlos bringing up the rear both on foot. He headed

for the higher ground and it was only a few minutes when they reached a small thicket where two burros were hidden. They were loaded with small packs strapped behind the saddles and were, it seemed, all ready for, with but a moment's pause, the two men mounted and the procession started again in the same order as before.

Bob rode close behind the large Mexican and, after an hour had passed, he motioned for him to ride up alongside, seemingly inclined to talk.

"We're probably not as bad as you think," he began. "And we're not of the lower class of Mexicans. In fact we've both spent the most of our lives in the States."

"I judged so from your talk," Bob said as he paused.

"And, as a matter of fact, we're neither thieves nor murderers, but we're down on our luck and that gold belongs to us as much as it does to you."

"But how about breaking into our room that night at the hotel and taking that map?"

"That was purely a mistake. You see, it was this way. I got only a glimpse of you just before dark that night and mistook you for a man who, a few weeks before, had robbed me of a very important paper. I determined to get it back and, in fact, thought I had it until later when I saw what it was. Then, judging that we had as much right to the

treasure as you, I decided to follow you. I guess you know the rest."

"But why try to capture us before we had found it?"

"That was Carlos' idea. I never did approve of it, but he thought you knew all the time where it was and that we could make you tell us."

"Then, if you're what you say you are, you haven't harmed that girl?"

"Not a bit of it. I wouldn't hurt a man unless I had to, let alone a girl."

"Do you know who she is?"

"Not exactly. She lives in a hut about three miles from that pyramid with an old man, her grandfather most likely. We stumbled on the place by accident a few days ago. But I wasn't bluffing when I told you not to expect any more help from her. We bought her off." The man made the statement with a low chuckle. "But don't let what I've told you lead you to think that we didn't mean all we said would happen if you try to get away. We meant it all right. There's enough gold there to make us both rich and we're going to keep it even if we have to kill all three of you although I sincerely hope that won't be necessary."

"And so do I," Bob smiled.

"Well, it's up to you," he said as he turned his head to see if the others were all right.

As Slats had thought the higher land was nearly free of the vines which had caused them so much labor on the way in and, although the forest was, for the most part, fairly dense, they made good time. About eleven o'clock José shot a large rabbit and, a little later, they had it for dinner.

"Sorry we're on such short rations," he apologized as he motioned that they were welcome to eat what was left after he and his companion had eaten. "We'll have to depend on what we can shoot for the most part but I guess we won't starve," he finished.

Fortunately they still had a good supply of coffee and several cups of the liquid went far toward making up for the paucity of food. They waited an hour after the meal to give the animals time to rest and then they started off again in the same order as before.

"Ought to make all of thirty miles by dark," José announced as the procession started.

But they found the going harder during the afternoon. The trees were closer together and there was a good deal of underbrush through which they had to push their way at a snail's pace. By five o'clock the burros were showing signs of distress and, soon after, the leader gave a reluctant order to halt.

"Guess we'll have to call it a day," he called back to Carlos.

"You're right we will," Carlos answered. "This animal is about all in."

"We've got just about enough flour for one batch of pan cakes and unless I can shoot something before dark we're not going to dine very sumptuously tonight," he told them as he untied their feet, after he had first bound their hands tightly together, and permitted them to slip from the backs of the tired burros. "We may have to browse like these beasts before we get back," he grinned. Then, turning to Carlos, he said: "You keep a close watch on them and I'll see if I can shoot something we can cook for supper. I won't be gone more'n a half hour or so."

About twenty minutes later they heard a shot not far away and Carlos gave it as his opinion that they would have something beside flap jacks for supper. But they were doomed to disappointment for, a few minutes later, the hunter returned empty handed.

"Only saw one rabbit," he growled, "and I missed him."

"Didn't you see any brooks?" Jack asked.

"Not a sign of a one, but we won't go thirsty for there's a good spring not more'n a hundred feet from here."

"The big Mexican built the fire and cooked the cakes while the other stood guard over the prisoners. It was evident to the latter that the men were

resolved to take no chances. Two small cakes apiece with a couple of crackers, of which they had a very little supply, washed down with coffee, had to suffice them.

"It would make it a lot easier all around," José said as it was beginning to get dark, "if you fellows would give us your word of honor that you will make no attempt to get away. What do you say?"

"Both boys looked at Slats who slowly shook his head.

"Well, I hardly expected it," the Mexican said as he noted the movement. "Anyhow," he continued, "it's harder on you than on us."

"Reckon we'll take a chance," Slats told him.

"That's up to you, of course, but don't forget that you have no chance and that we'll shoot if you make us do it."

"We'll remember it all right."

The tent had not yet been pitched and their captor soon informed them that it would not be that night.

"It's going to be pretty dark tonight and you're going to lay right out here where one of us can keep an eye on you all the time," he told them.

"Suits us," Bob declared.

"All right, but it'll be your own fault if you don't get any sleep."

"Don't worry. We assume all responsibility," he taunted.

Bob feared that the man was right in regard to their inability to sleep and yet he would not have had Slats do otherwise than refuse to give their word not to try to escape. Not that he saw much chance of success but, he told himself, there was always a possibility. The night darkened rapidly as there was no moon and a thick haze obscured the stars. He was lying between Slats and Jack, their bodies almost touching each other. Just across the fire, which was blazing brightly, sat José, his gun in his hand and his eyes never seemed to turn from them. A few feet back of him Carlos was snoring loudly.

Bob had made no attempt to loosen the rope about his wrists knowing that so long as the man was on guard it would be of little or no advantage even if he could free himself. And he believed he could do that very thing for he had tensed his muscles when the rope was tightened and upon relaxing them he had found that there was considerable play. At any rate, he told himself, it made it a whole lot more comfortable. He had resolved to keep awake and watch his captor in the hope that the man would succumb to the drowsiness which he felt sure would come upon him sooner or later. He knew that he had not slept more than half the time the previous night and felt certain that he must be in need of sleep. So he watched him closely between half closed lids. He judged that an hour had passed

when the guard got up to replenish the fire, after which he carefully examined the prisoners to see that they were secure. He was most careful not to disturb them doubtlessly thinking they were safer while asleep. Whether Slats and Jack were really asleep he could not tell but at least they pretended to be if they were not and he did the same.

Satisfied that all was well the man resumed his former position on the other side of the fire, but in a few minutes was up again and, for a time, paced back and forth. Bob gave an inward chuckle for he knew then that the man was fighting the desire for sleep.

"If he'd sit down and keep still for a few minutes I'll bet he'd be off," he thought.

Soon he sat down again and, after what seemed an hour or more, Bob saw his head begin to droop, while, little by little, his body slid down until only his shoulders were resting against the tree. Neither Slats or Jack had moved since the man had examined their bonds and he judged that they were sleeping. Another ten minutes and he was equally sure that the man opposite was doing the same thing.

"Now if I can only get this rope off," he thought as he began work.

But he had overestimated his ability for, after working for several minutes, he was forced to acknowledge to himself that, although there was some

play in the rope, it was not enough. It was a tremendous disappointment to be so near freedom and to find it impossible of achievement.

He had just started to make a last desperate attempt to accomplish what he felt was impossible when, without warning, a soft hand was pressed firmly over his mouth.

"S-s-s-s—h," whispered a low voice.

He did not move but his heart leaped. He knew that voice.

"Turn over a bit," the voice was so low that he barely caught the words.

He obeyed, careful to make no slightest sound, and the next moment his hands were free, and a small pocket knife was thrust into his hand.

"Good bye," he heard the voice whisper.

He started to speak but she checked the words with her hand again and in another moment, although he heard no sound, he knew that she was gone. At first he was minded to follow her, but second thought convinced him of the foolishness of such a step. In the first place he would be unable to find her and in the second he must stay and get himself and the others out of the clutches of their enemies. Should he first free Slats and Jack or should he overpower the sleeping Mexican? Neither of his friends had moved during the past few minutes and he was sure they were asleep. Should he

awake them one or the other might make a sound which would arouse the sleeping guard and his chance would be gone. All this flashed through his mind in a few seconds and it was probably not more than a quarter of a minute after the girl had left before he was carefully and noiselessly drawing his body from between the others.

Once clear he began to creep silently but rapidly toward the sleeping man. He knew that he was likely to awake at any moment and felt that he must not lose a single second more than was necessary. His thought was to remove the revolver from the man's hand without waking him if such a thing were possible, and then to free his friends. Once in possession of the gun it would make little difference how soon he awoke as he would then be master of the situation.

He was within six feet of the man when he stirred and Bob flattened himself on the ground praying that he would not open his eyes. The prayer was answered and soon the boy get to his feet again and took another step forward. He could see plainly enough by the light of the fire and his heart sank a bit as he saw that the man's right hand seemingly retained a firm grip on the coveted gun. To remove it without waking him seemed impossible and, for an instant, he hesitated. And during that instant the man awoke.

CHAPTER XV.

CONCLUSION.

WHEN Bob saw the Mexican's eyes open he knew it was do or die and with a leap he landed fairly on top of him. As he had hoped the shock threw the revolver from the man's hand and his eye caught it as it fell several feet away. He realized that he was in a tight place as undoubtedly the noise of the coming struggle would arouse the other Mexican and he could hope for no help from his friends. If only he had freed them first. All this flashed through his mind almost before he had landed and he at once aimed a blow for the man's chin hoping to put him out long enough to retrieve the revolver. But the man must either have seen or sensed the blow for he moved his head enough to escape the force of it and only a glancing blow, which did no damage, resulted.

The surprise of the attack gave the boy an advantage at first and before the man could cry out he had him by the throat with both hands. But the Mexican quickly recovered his wits and, grabbing Bob's wrists, he dragged his hands away enough to give vent to a loud yell.

That shout would, Bob knew, arouse the other man and unless he accomplished something instantly there could be but one end to the combat. So gathering all his strength, he freed himself from the grasp which held his wrists and threw himself from the body of the Mexican in the direction in which the revolver had fallen. Another instant it was in his hand and he was on his feet and had the man covered. But, by this time, the other man had gotten fully awake and Bob could make out his form as he got to his feet.

"Up with your hands both of you or I'll shoot," he shouted.

"Drill him, Carlos," the other snapped. "He couldn't hit you if tried."

But Carlos evidently thought differently for his hands were already high in the air and, at Bob's command he advanced until he was standing only three or four feet from the other.

"You coward," José sneered.

Carlos did not answer and Bob ordered him to turn around and back toward him. He obeyed and as soon as he was within reach he took the revolver from his pocket and thrust it into his own.

"Now you two stand right where you are," he ordered as he stepped forward and, ordering José not to lower his hands on pain of being shot, felt him over fearing that he might have another gun. But

he found none and, after again warning them not to move, he stepped around the fire keeping them covered with his gun and, an instant later Slats and Jack, now wide awake, of course, were free and on their feet.

"How in the world—" Slats began but Bob interrupted.

"Tell you about it later. Let's get them tied up first."

"You said it," Jack agreed.

It took but a moment to tie them good and fast and at last Bob was able to take a good long breath.

"How about turning the tables again?" Jack could not refrain from mocking the Mexican.

The latter made no reply but the look which he gave the boy made him wince in spite of his courage.

"Now how about it?" Slats demanded.

"Come over here a bit where they can't hear and I'll tell you," Bob replied.

"So we owe a lot more to that gal, bless her heart," Slats declared as soon as Bob had told them the story. "But I must warn yer that yer showed poor judgment in not waking us fust," he added.

"I realized that," Bob said humbly.

"Wal, of course, if we had as good fore sight as we have hind sight, I reckon as how we could all help makin' lots of mistakes we do make," Slats consoled him.

" 'All's well that ends well'," Jack quoted.

"But this ain't ended yet," Slats warned him.

"I know it, and let me tell you that the tables have turned so many times lately that I'm afraid it's getting to be a habit," he said.

"And it's a habit we want to break right now," Bob added. "If those fellows ever get on top again it'll go mighty hard with us let me tell you," he added soberly.

Don't we know it?" Jack asked.

"Well, then, I'm going to suggest that until we get back only one of us sleeps at a time. I know it'll be pretty hard, but I believe it's the only safe way."

"An' I know it," Slats was very emphatic in the statement.

"Then we'll consider it settled."

"You bet."

"Shore will."

"Well, it's only a little after ten o'clock," Jack told them as he glanced at his watch. "Slats and I have both had a nap and now it's up to you, Bob."

Bob started to demur but they quickly overruled him and he consented to sleep until one o'clock at which time they agreed to call him. That arrangement would give each of the others a two hour nap, Jack explained.

So, while Bob slept, Slats and Jack kept close watch over their prisoners.

Promptly at one o'clock, according to the agreement, they awoke him and Jack turned in for two hours after which Slats took his turn.

"It's a rabbit or a mighty slim breakfast," Slats said shortly after five o'clock."

"And you're the man to get it," Jack told him.

"Wal, I'll do my best."

As it proved his best was good enough for in less than a half hour he was back with, what Jack declared, was the largest rabbit he ever saw. Resolved to take no chances, after they had eaten they untied the Mexicans, one at the time, and permitted them to eat.

By shortly after six they were again on the way but now Slats was in the lead and after him came the two Mexicans, their feet tied as had been the others the day before. The boys, together with the pack burro, brought up the rear. In spite of their lack of provision they were in excellent spirits and, as they pushed their way through the forest, snatches of song broke the silence. The prisoners rode in sullen silence, answering only in monosylables when spoken to. It seemed that their spirit was completely broken, but the boys were certain they were constantly on the watch for an opportunity to again turn the tables, and they were resolved that it should not happen if they could prevent it by any possible means.

Shortly after ten o'clock they came to a large

stream and paused long enough to allow Jack to catch a good mess of trout.

"We'll have a good dinner, anyhow," Bob declared as he held up the string of fish.

"No danger of starvin' while we're in reach of water," Slats laughed.

They made, according to their estimate, about forty miles that day as the going was exceptionally good and all rejoiced that they had not returned the way they came. There was enough of the trout left for supper and, although as Jack put it, the bill of fare was mighty skimpy, they did not have to go to bed hungry.

"Why so pensive, Bob?" Jack asked as they were sitting about the fire before making arrangements for the night.

"Just thinking," Bob replied.

"And I'll bet I can guess what about."

"Shoot."

"That girl."

"Right the first time."

"And I don't blame you. I wish we could have met her if only to thank her for what she did for us."

"Yes, so do I, but I reckon she did not want to get acquainted for some reason best known to herself."

"But why do you suppose she is living away out here a hundred miles from nowhere?"

"Why indeed."

"It's a mystery all right and really it's the only one we didn't solve."

"And the biggest one."

"You bet."

"And we owe it all to her," Bob sighed.

"You aren't falling in love with her, are you?" Jack asked a bit anxiously.

Bob ignored the question and turned to Slats.

"Jack and I'll take the first watch."

"Suits me," Slats replied. "But yer're ter call me not later nor eleven o'clock."

"All right."

They had pitched the tent and by half past eight Slats had crawled inside. The two Mexicans, firmly tied, had been placed a few feet from the fire and the two boys sat on the ground a little to the right of them close enough so that they could hear if they spoke to each other. They did not purpose to give them an opportunity to make any plans together.

"Why do you suppose that girl didn't want to get acquainted with us?" Bob whispered after they had sat in silence for some time.

"Search me," Jack replied.

"I wonder what she looked like."

"Gee, whiz, but I believe you are in love with her."

"Don't be foolish. Why, I never saw her to get a good look at her."

"But I've heard of such a thing as falling in love with a voice," Jack scoffed.

"So have I, but this is not one of the instances."

"Well, old man, I don't blame you for thinking about her. I've done a lot of it myself. I wonder if we'll ever see her again."

"Probably not."

There is little more to tell of the return to the Mexican town. It was a journey of hardship and toil and, although they succeeded in shooting enough game to keep them from actual want, they were, as Jack declared, never more than half filled. The two prisoners never got a chance to again turn the tables as at least two of the three always were guarding them. Several times they crossed streams which yielded a mess of trout to Jack's skill with the rod and they were a welcome addition to their bill of fare.

Finally, about three o'clock, one hot afternoon Slats imparted the welcome information that they were within two miles of the town. The three had already decided what was to be done with the Mexicans and now, calling a halt, he addressed his remarks to them.

"We've decided ter make no charge agin yer so yer don't bother us any more," he told them. "The

boys are goin' ter stay here with yer while I take the gold inter town and make arrangements with the express company ter ship it north. Yer see we don't trust yer none an' we ain't goin' ter take no chances. When I get back if it's all right we'll turn yer loose an' yer can go whar yer've a mind ter, only let me warn yer ter keep away from us."

"And you're not going to do anything to us?" José asked doubtfully.

"Not a thing more'n I said."

"It's better than we deserve."

"Yer bet it is."

"And we'll give you no more trouble."

"Wal, see that yer don't."

A moment later Slats left them leading the pack burro behind him and the boys allowed the men to dismount. He returned a little less than two hours later with the welcome news that the gold was already on a train bound for the north and showed them the agent's receipt.

"I reckon that about finishes it up," he said with a broad grin.

"And we can go now?" José asked eagerly.

"Any time yer want ter," Slats told him as he untied his hands.

"We'll leave yer shootin' irons at the hotel when we leave ter-morrow an' yer can get 'em any time after that."

Sixteen hours later they too were on board a train headed north.

"Well, I reckon we can call this expedition a success," Jack declared as he settled back in the Pullman seat with a loud sigh of relief.

"You bet, only—" Bob began, but Jack interrupted.

"I know, it's too bad we didn't see her again but we can't have everything, you know."

They had telegraphed ahead to the ranch that they were coming and when the following day, the train pulled in at the station at Cold Springs, Jeb and Sue were there to meet them.

"So you found the mine, eh?" Jeb asked as he grasped all their hands at once.

"We shore did," Slats grinned.

"And I'm just as mad as I can be because you wouldn't take me with you," Sue pouted.

"You can thank your lucky stars you didn't go," Jack laughed.

On the way out to the ranch the story of their adventures was told in full and Sue was obliged to acknowledge that it would have been a poor place for a girl even though she was used to roughing it.

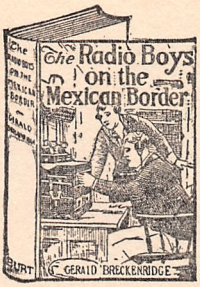
"But it must have been a wonderful trip," she sighed.

"It was," both boys answered together.

"And you were lucky to get back whole."

"Bob didn't, that is, not quite," Jack teased, and added: "He's all here except 'the girl he left behind him'."

THE END.



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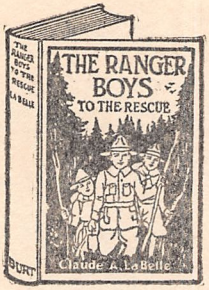

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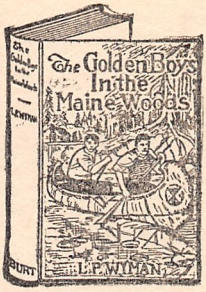

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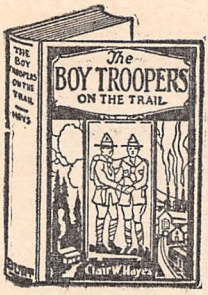

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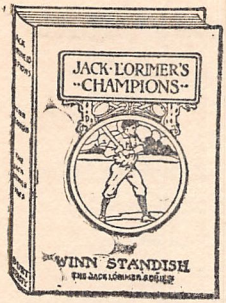

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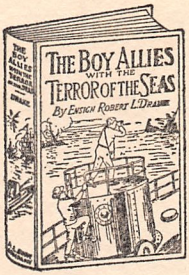

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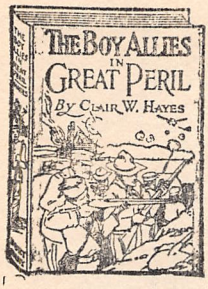

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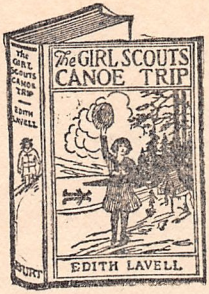

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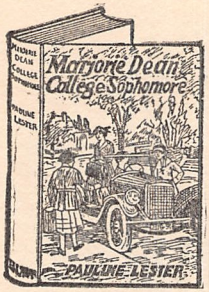

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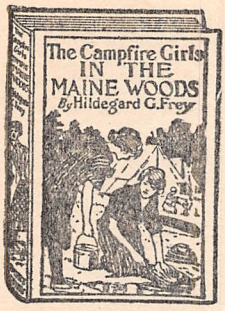

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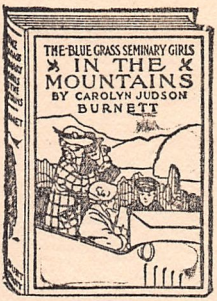

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